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Linked Biographies in Changing Times. Syriac Christians in Vienna



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RÉSUMÉ

Lier ensemble les biographies dans des temps différents. Le cas des Chrétiens syriaques à Vienne

Cet article étudie les relations entre l'histoire et la biographie dans un contexte international. Il est fondé sur une recherche ethnographique parmi les Chrétiens syriaques à Vienne, originaires de Turquie. Dans la construction de leur identité, deux événements historiques ont été particulièrement importants : d'abord les massacres des Chrétiens en Anatolie orientale en 1915-1916 qui ont réduit et traumatisé leur communauté puis les processus de dispersion massive avec les migrations vers l'Europe occidentale après les années 1960. En adoptant le point de vue de la narration, l'article considère les biographies comme des formes de négociations avec l'histoire et d'appartenance. L'impact des événements historiques sur chaque vie individuelle s'inscrit dans un contexte social, ce que la perspective biographique doit prendre en compte tant sur le plan méthodologique que sur le plan analytique. L'institution familiale apparaît comme le contexte clé des « biographies associées ».

Mots-clés : Chrétiens syriaques. Narrations biographiques. Transmission. Communauté.

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Biographies evoke the complex interface between “individual” and “society”. Researchers working with biographical material often seek to comprehend a personal life within the larger historical and collective processes within which it unfolds. Despite this anthropological sensibility, however, the methods and theories of biography or life history have largely been developed outside anthropology. “Life history [...] has remained on the periphery of the discipline” noted Vincent Crapanzano [1984: 954], reviewing a new trend of life history publications in US-anthropology in the early 1980s, a period in which serious academic interest in “life stories” also increased in continental Europe, particularly in sociology [Bertaux and Kohli, 1984].

Against the backdrop of the postmodern critique in anthropology in the 1970s and 80s the production of life stories was considered a promising strategy of reinstalling the research participant to anthropological writing without subsuming them under monolithic “cultures” or “tribes.” It also helped to “dethrone”

anthropologists from their presumed positions of authority in the anthropological canon. They could be shown to be cultural learners dependent on forming relationships with complex individuals on the ground, rather than “heroes” in charge of their fieldwork. Thus, for instance, Vincent Crapanzano’s “Tuhami, Portrait of a Moroccan” [1980], or Marjorie Shostak’s “Nisa, The Life and Words of a !Kung Woman” [1981] became often-cited examples of biographical anthropology in which the authors “gave voice” to their informants whilst revealing their own participation in the stories that were produced. While both authors took different approaches to life history and constructed rather dissimilar ethnographic texts about their “informant-friends”, the association of the biographical with the subjective dimension of fieldwork has remained strong in anthropology. More often than not it has revolved around the anthropologist and their autobiographical or “auto-ethnographic” involvement with their research field and the insight and reflexivity

Ethnologie française, XLIV, 2014, 3, p. 469-478

that sprung from it [e.g., Behar 1996; Bochner and Ellis, 2002; Ellis, 2004; Okely and Callaway, 1992; Schiller and Fouron, 2001; Scheper-Hughes, 1993; Waterston and Rylko-Bauer, 2006]. Biography has also been employed as a category by anthropologists who study other anthropologists' works through their life-stories [e.g. Grinker, 2000; Cole, 2003; Kerns, 2003]. Despite this surprisingly limited application of the biographical genre in the anthropological canon, anthropologists regularly collect life histories, or fragments thereof, as part of their research. After all, talking to someone about their life offers a major form of access to them as *historical* beings and to the ways in which 'being in time' may be culturally understood. This is the broader concern of this paper and I shall also look beyond anthropology for inspiration.

In what follows I draw on life-history based material which emerged from long-term ethnographic research among Syriac Christians (Syriacs, Suryoye)¹ from Turkey based in Germany and Austria. The material I present here was collected in Vienna in 2011. The first Syriac guest workers began to settle in the city from the early 1970s. Due to changing immigration regimes and worsening political conditions in Turkey more Syriac Christians immigrated later as asylum seekers. Today, the population of the Viennese community is about 2,500. The Syriac historical experience is dominated by the catastrophe of genocide in 1915-1916 in eastern Anatolia, periods of oppression as minority Christians and by large-scale emigration and dispersal. In drawing on biographical material I shall illustrate how these historical experiences inform intimate self-understanding. More generally I wish to advocate a methodological and interpretive use of what I call 'linked biographies' as a way of accessing the relationship between larger historical issues and the particularity of lived lives.

■ Linked biographies

Biography is habitually associated with an individual's experience over the passage of time. The notion of "linked biographies" simply reflects what might be overlooked in this respect, namely that individuals make sense of their lives as social beings and in communicative acts. In situating themselves in time and place biographers rarely appear as monadic creatures but tend to produce an awareness of other people

and reflect more collectively shared values and types of knowledge. Looking at an individual life history within an ensemble of others thus informs the analysis of biographical material with ethnographic sensibility. It takes into account the situated character of individual life stories and the fact that they take shape within specific social collectives. The notion of 'linked biographies' thus departs from the single-case approach often associated with biographies and takes account of life histories as socially and contextually interdependent. Evidently the social ties relevant to a person can evolve along multiple lines and change in significance over a lifetime. My case study focusses on the "family"² as a context for collecting and examining biographical material. This reflects both the actual significance individuals assigned to family links in their stories and my expectation that a transgenerational perspective would offer some insight into the workings of time within a historically embedded social collective.

Because of its formative role in the transmission of historical experience and cultural values the "family" has often been regarded as a social unit relevant to biographical research. Thus, for instance, social scientists have used inter-generational biographies to study the long-term effects of historical trauma or the impact of major historical change on specific communities. Evidently biographical research is applied in a varied, multi-disciplinary field and has developed in scope and methodological refinement over the past twenty years [see, e.g. Chamberlayne *et al.*, 2000; Merrill and West, 2009; Völter *et al.*, 2005]. It is not my intention to discuss this here. However, before presenting my own example I shall briefly sketch three different approaches which are concerned with studying social and political change through family and generational biography. I do not aim for comprehensive coverage of the field but rather wish to engage in dialogue with some existing models that all draw on narrative interviewing, yet use material in slightly different ways and bring distinct configurations of historical "impact" to the understanding of their subjects.

Studying historical change through intergenerational biographies

The first approach involves a socio-psychological dimension and has become familiar in the German-speaking context. It is largely associated with the sociologist Gabriele Rosenthal who conducted pioneering work on the transmission of the Holocaust in familial

biographies of both Jews and Germans [1999]. Starting from the assumption that families mediate the impact of collective history at intimate level she argued that the acts and experiences of grandparents affected the “biographical work” [Rosenthal, *my translation*, 1999: 15] of their descendants, even if silence and repression dominated interfamilial dialogues. It is in the psychological responses to a traumatic or difficult past and the ways in which they informed and often complicated intimate relationships that she and her associates diagnosed the impact of the past. The fact that taboos and silences marked many of the biographies they collected gave rise to an analytical emphasis on “hermeneutic case reconstructions” [ibid., 1999: 12] in which researchers compared the facts and sequences of the “lived life” to those of the “narrated life”. The suggestion being that only by comparing the told story to a more or less accurate historical account could some understanding be achieved of the biography as a response to both critical historical events and the societal norms that guided their evaluation. To achieve these insights within an intergenerational frame the researchers made use of a highly elaborate methodological and analytical procedure which precludes detailed presentation here [see Rosenthal, 1995; 1999; 2000]. Suffice is to say that the method relies on collecting detailed biographical knowledge and straddles the boundary between research and therapy. Whilst this may raise ethical questions about the researcher’s right to investigate intimate relationships, Rosenthal clearly made a powerful case for the family as an important social field within which historical events become assimilated and transmitted.

The second approach is informed by a strong interest in social history. It can be exemplarily found in the works of historian Paul Thompson, often regarded as a pioneer in British life history research and his frequent collaborator, French sociologist Daniel Bertaux. They approached intergenerational biographies primarily as historical sources rather than as intimate negotiations of a traumatic history. They argued that examining life stories across “an intergenerational system of interlocking [...] relationships” [Thompson 2005: 27] provided unique insights into cultural, social and material transmission processes between the generations. As “microcosms” of society [Bertaux and Delcroix, 2000: 83] family ties unfold over time and are guided by norms and values which reflect larger societal conditions and constraints. The ways in which these ties themselves become mobilised and re-interpreted over time were

thus seen to be reflective of historical and ideological change. As Bertaux and Delcroix put it “the life stories of five persons connected by close kinship ties, [...] bring more information than five separated life stories: they illuminate and reflect upon each other like the gems of a necklace” [ibid., 2000: 74].

Thompson and Bertaux drew on such interlinked biographies to study phenomena such as social mobility in France and Britain [Bertaux and Thompson 2005a; 2007] or the transformation from socialist to capitalist society in Russia [Bertaux, Rotkirch and Thompson, 2004]. Here life stories often serve to draw out generation-based experiences of social change, illustrated by the occupational trajectories individuals follow and the life choices they make, informed by familial socialisation patterns on the one hand and wider conditions of social class on the other [see contributions in Bertaux and Thompson 2005; Bertaux and Malysheva 2004; Semenova and Thompson 2004]. In the earlier work in particular there is relatively little concern with the role of the researcher, the interview dynamic or with the “veracity” of stories, as the emphasis lies on the sociological data life stories offer about the changing dynamics of, for instance, class, gender or child rearing within specific societal milieux and historical contexts.³ Whilst the researchers used historical sources and documents as an evidence base against which life histories were interpreted, they also held that life histories could offer knowledge that could challenge conventional historical accounts.

The “narrative” approach to biographical material is the third area of study I wish to mention here. It revolves around the understanding that the process of telling a life is a social practice in its own right, in that it involves meaning-making in storied form. In their essential role for making sense of our lives narratives have often been considered cultural universals [Ochs and Capps, 1996: 19]. At the same time, and this is important for biographical research, we do not create narratives entirely freely, and are never their “sole authors” [Czarniawska, 2004: 5]. We are born into narrative communities, small and large, and learn to become conversant in established narrative repertoires and their implicit cultural and moral “truths” [cf. Taylor, 1989: 47]. Migration researchers, for instance, have studied biographical narratives for their insights into migration as a life-changing act;⁴ however, only few have included cross-generational frameworks, often showing how “family narratives” produce cohesion between family members across historical change

and geographical dispersal [e.g. Chamberlain, 2005; Fog Olwig, 2007; Stephan, 2009].

The focus on “narratives” as scripts of belonging includes the reality that societies hold legitimate stories about themselves, often reinforced by powerful actors, which may render actual personal experiences insignificant, illegitimate or subversive. Both Rosenthal’s research on the interfamilial transmission of the Holocaust and Bertaux and Thompson’s research on post-Soviet transitions provide ample evidence in this respect. Thus, for instance, the public silence about the Shoah in the immediate post-war decades in Germany supported the evasive and self-exonerating relationship many Germans assumed vis-à-vis their past [Rosenthal 1999: 28–29]. Citizens in the Soviet Union learned to withhold family histories and autobiographic memories in order to protect themselves from the state and told oral historians “polished” versions of their pasts even after the collapse of state socialism [Bertaux *et al.*, 2004]. In other words, personal stories need to be understood within a larger context of powerful historical and communal scripts and their enabling or disabling effects. This is also borne out by my own research with Syriac Christians in Vienna.

Syriac biographies as narratives of belonging

Syriacs who had migrated to the city as children or young people in the 1970s and 80s often unanimously stated “we didn’t know who we were” upon arrival in Europe. They referred to the repressive minority regime in Turkey which had rendered separate ethno-national identities illegitimate. Whilst they had a strong awareness of being minority Christians, were familiar with privately communicated histories of injury, and had often had experiences of discrimination themselves, they had also imbibed a subdued and highly privatised expression of these experiences, and learned the survival strategies of “keeping a low profile”, encouraged by their elders and the Syriac Church. It was this generation which then developed and invigorated a post-emigration national movement in Europe which forged new and distinct identity narratives and mapped collective memories of loss and discrimination onto a larger ethno-national discourse that identified Syriac Christians as “Assyrians” or “Aramaean” and celebrated distinct pre-Islamic cultural roots. This new form of ethno-national consciousness raising was partly generated by the integration into a new European cultural universe in which

nationhood figured as an essential identity marker, by asylum regimes which required asylum seekers to account for their *ethno-national* or *ethno-religious* experiences of persecution, and the growing desire to acquire recognition as an ethnic “community” in new multicultural and diasporic environments. These forms of consciousness-raising also involved trans-generational transmission and proselytising, and often triggered conflicts. Whilst many of the first “guest workers” I met told their immigration stories in terms of the search for labour, economic migration motives became increasingly downplayed and supplanted with narratives of persecution, reflecting actually worsening political conditions in Turkey and the integration into the asylum system in Europe, as well as desires for a unifying collective identity. In other words, biographical narratives could be resources of self-inscription into ethno-national frames of belonging that did not exist in pre-migration Turkey.

In the following pages I shall discuss biographical material collected among Syriac Christians in Vienna. My example is concerned with the biographical negotiation of historical change in an intergenerational frame. Much like the studies introduced at the outset of this section, the example shows that larger historical processes are mediated in intimate contexts of socialisation. Bertaux and Thompson [2005b] rightly commented that intergenerational transmission is not simply a “handing down” but a complex process of mutual exchange and communication, and it may be a handing-up and sideways as well as down.

Biographies produced in interview encounters are narrative constructs and do not give the outsider unconstructed access to the “real” process of inter-familial exchange or to raw historical experience; instead they give insight into how individuals articulate their memories, respond to their experience, to those who inhabit their worlds and to the audiences of their stories. Clearly “biography” is also a cultural genre.⁵ Among Syriac Christians I became particularly familiar with the notion of life as a “path,” traditionally associated with the Christian understanding of life as a fateful route from life to death and afterlife, with the quality of life in the *hereafter* being strongly linked to the believer’s conduct on earth. Notions of following the “good path,” in keeping with a Christian lifestyle and a dutiful relationship to family and community, were also, in many ways, notions of a “good” life story. Individuals often situated themselves as members of the Syriac community, and particularly, as members

of families in their stories, and negotiated their position in these moral communities. Thus, as the example below will illustrate, “linking biographies” was also a culturally relevant practice, in which individuals reinforced or challenged the norms of relevant social ties.

Whilst I expected to access the “actual” historical experiences of my informants through their accounts I also took a decidedly “narrative” approach.⁶ Thus I was not primarily concerned with the verisimilitude of stories or with reconstructing people’s lives. Rather I put the emphasis on how individuals told their stories, related to larger familial, communal and historical scripts and charged their accounts with ethics and a sense of belonging. Obviously the degree of closeness one can achieve in an interview context needs to be negotiated with research participants, and researchers cannot assume they have a right to investigate intimate or difficult stories. In the context of the research presented here, biographical stories were often moral negotiations of belonging rather than marked by the desire to reveal “family secrets”.

■ Community endangerment and biographies of dis-/loyalty

Two major historical episodes have impacted the lives of Turkey’s Syriac Christians in the 20th century: First, the genocide of Armenians and other Ottoman Christians in eastern Anatolia in 1915–1916, and an oppressive process of “Turkification” following it, which dominated state–minority relations in the Turkish Republic until quite recently.⁷ Second, a process of emigration that led to the near disappearance of the community from its ancient homeland in south-east Turkey. Whilst emigration was a direct consequence of these difficult political circumstances which intensified with the Turkish–Kurdish conflict that erupted in Turkey’s south-east in the early 1980s, European *guest worker* policies and the search for better economic opportunities also provided a pull-effect. A fair number of those who remained in Turkey moved to Istanbul. In both the city and the rural south-east the remaining small communities maintained their separate religious and linguistic identity, albeit under often difficult “unofficial” conditions.⁸

In both Germany and Austria where I conducted research the Syriacs decided soon after arrival that they were in these countries to stay. The rapid reduction

of the communities in Turkey coinciding with the large-scale resettlement in Europe made return migration unthinkable for most until very recently.⁹ Today most Syriacs in these countries are naturalised citizens. Whilst low education levels and the lack of German had trapped many first generation immigrants in the lower sector of the labour market, their children have since contributed to a trend of upward social mobility.

These historical events and their repercussions were also cultural themes. Through many years of acquaintance with Syriacs in Turkey, Germany and Austria, I came to perceive their prevailing narratives of history as narratives of community endangerment and loss.¹⁰ These highlighted the fate of the Suryoye as a marginal minority who had been brought to the brink of survival and whose future was uncertain. In this context emigration was often seen as a “way out,” yet also as a desertion of the homeland and a loss of community. However, there were also marked generational differences in this respect, and these transpired particularly well in inter-generational stories. This reflected the often radical difference that separated the biographical experience of grandparent, child and grandchild; the way in which collective memories became re-interpreted over time and mapped onto new narratives of collective identity, and finally the ways in which historical ‘lessons’ became sublimated into an ethics of familial and communal bonding that had to be biographically achieved.

Collecting “linked biographies” revealed important insights into culturally informed responses to history. Being asked to talk about their lives led many participants to integrate themselves in family ties and to build family, narratively, as the most important social unit that mattered to them. Situating oneself in a world of others often meant to situate oneself in a world populated by kin, in their histories and the paths they had laid. Telling a life often meant establishing continuity with family and affirming one’s place in a community of mutual loyalty and responsibility. For instance, narratives of personal experience could focus on how one followed parental guidance or authority for one’s course of action; made sacrifices to safeguard the continuity of family or found unique support in familial ties and was determined to reproduce them. This could be tied to the belief that a stateless and historically beleaguered community could only be reproduced in and through the family, and that a morally good Syriac Christian was an individual loyal to his or her family. In this sense biographies could take shape as

biographies of loyalty to family and, in extension of it, to community. In many ways it was not in the isolated response to a specific historical event but in the ways in which individuals steered from this narrative of family unity, interrupted it, challenged or openly broke with it that their own stakes in shifting norms of continuity between past and present came through.

To illustrate this point and convey a flavour of the stories I collected, I present brief extracts from biographies of a mother and son. Seyde was born in 1961 and left for Vienna as a young bride with her husband in 1976. Her son Simon¹¹ was born in Vienna in 1978. As will be seen both the history of repression in Turkey as well as immigration to Austria inform these accounts as key historical themes.

Collective suffering and familial loyalty

Seyde

When I was two years old I went to live with my grandfather. My mother's father. He was Armenian. Yes my mother is Armenian and my father is Syriac. I stayed mainly with my grandfather. Until I was eight. He was Armenian, an Armenian from Mush, do you know where that is? Near the Russian border. During the *sayfo*,¹² when the *sayfo* came they fled. Everybody fled in different directions. My grandfather stayed in Turkey, well his mother was killed and he ran away. He arrived at the village in which we lived. There he was adopted by a Muslim family.¹³ A couple who didn't have any children. He stayed there until he was sixteen, then he realised they wanted to convert him to Islam and he ran away. [...]

When I was eight I returned to S [town where her parents lived]. At that time we had six other Christian families in the village, but then all of them moved to Istanbul and we were left on our own. My grandfather became anxious because they could take us or kidnap us. For instance my aunt, when she was thirteen the Muslims wanted to kidnap her. Then my grandfather sent her to B, he gave her to someone [into marriage]. Yes this is how it was Heidi. Because of this we had to go to S to live with my parents. There I finished school. I wanted to study but I couldn't because it would have been unsafe. And then I stayed in S. But there was always fear. [...]

When I was thirteen, fourteen I was betrothed. Before the betrothal my father had heard from a Christian, "Jusuf take good care of your girl. They want to kidnap her." Obviously my father didn't tell me. He told my mother that she should take good care of me. [...]¹⁴ Then my father sent me to his village. And then people heard that Jusuf had a girl and they asked for her hand.

Yes my father didn't want to give me into marriage yet, but what was he to do? That is Heidi why I say the youngsters nowadays don't care. I was 13 and I thought of my father! And of his life. I said, "I couldn't bear it if something happened to him because of me". I thought, "Whoever comes along I will take him". And this is exactly what I did. So that nothing would happen to my father.

As this extract shows Seyde situates her biography in a web of family relations and social roles, and looks through these at the outside world. Both her father and grandfather are major figures guiding family affairs and her own agency. However, they too are not free agents but constantly at risk from assault by hostile "Muslims". Seyde incorporated herself into the community of beleaguered Christians, and frequently identified the antagonists generically as "Muslims", which was a strong narrative motif in all life-stories of this generation. Importantly Seyde drew a range of gendered moral commitments from the impact of this threat on her family. These revolved around parent-child relations and the moral prescriptions attached to them. The way in which she positioned the different protagonists and their interactions show that her vulnerability and lack of agency gets constructed by an overwhelming "Muslim" threat which put her male guardians into a socially risky position. Seyde related a process of social identity construction that marked her out as a dutiful daughter who prioritised her father's honour over her own wants. Had she been kidnapped his status as a respectable male who protected his daughters would have been seriously damaged, as well as her own honour as a young female conscious of her responsibility to safeguard family reputation. In reconstructing the dialogue¹⁵ between her father and the messenger and between herself and her parents at key moments of her young life Seyde highlighted the dramatic unfolding of events and the sacrifice she was prepared to make for the greater good of the family. Despite the price she paid she positioned herself as having the same value system, defining the young generation of today as egoistic and irresponsible. Education is a sub-theme in Seyde's narrative, and much like in other accounts of migrants of her generation, it is a desired object. For her, however, access to education was blocked by the social risks associated with being young, female and Christian. She drew on what might be called a sacrificial discourse to constitute her narrative identity as a dutiful woman who performed

her social role for both the good of the family and the sustenance of a larger ethnic collective. Whilst these values also appeared in her son's account, he identified them as difficult.

Migration and the model life-path

Simon

I was born in 1978. My mother was just about, well officially she was 18, actually she was 17, because she also married officially at 15 but unofficially she was 14, and that was considered too young. Turkey didn't allow marriage at that age and then they simply made her a year older. So my parents were VERY¹⁶ young, if not to say extremely young, my father was just 20. Well they moved here from Turkey and I was born here. With retrospect I have to say one of the few things I am really thankful to my parents for is that they put me into a private Kindergarten. I was the only foreigner in inverted commas. In my class. I was only surrounded by native Austrians.¹⁷ [...]

I didn't want to go to university, it wasn't my aim to be honest. I thought I'd do a technical college but my parents didn't allow it. They said, 'No no you will have to go to university so you need to complete the Matura¹⁸ and then you have to become a doctor or something like that', the classic thing among the Suryoye. OK I let them indoctrinate me and did my Matura [...]

And then the year 2011 came and I see it as my year of epiphany. Finally I have managed to do what I WANT, and not what my parents, or my relatives or the Suryoye in general want me to do. [...] I feel as if I had freed myself from a cocoon. Well because I know now I want to become self-employed and also because, well, I don't know how to put it, I have decided to no longer live according to what other people design for me, the parents or relatives or the whole community environment. That things are so prescribed, that you have to marry a Syriac girl and are not supposed to do anything else. I always felt I lived in such a grey zone, a mish mash, and now I am out of it, for the first time in my life I spoke to my mother about personal issues, about women even, I have never done that before.

Like his mother who linked her own early life with that of a significant family member, Simon began his story by linking his life to hers, and she remained present throughout his account. He explained that his mother had been the main parental authority in the home and a strict disciplinarian. In the extract he also referred to Seyde's early marriage, however, did not echo her story but insinuated that his parents were

simply too young when they married. Most prominently, though, Simon revealed his recent decision to change the direction his life had been taking so far, and this desire for change dominated his story as a whole. In evaluating his history as being shaped by a conflict between strict parents and "Syriac" norms on the one hand and an "Austrian" socialisation in school and among friends on the other, he explained how his past forged the present desire to leave the 'cocoon' and design his own plans for the future. He said that he had just recently revealed to his mother a long-term relationship with an Austrian woman which he had kept secret for fear of causing a major conflict with his family. Like Seyde Simon directly addressed me as an interlocutor and both were emotionally involved. Simon had clearly gone through a recent period of emotional upheaval and confided that I was the first person he was so open to about these issues, thus indicating how my own sympathetic outsider-identity was affecting the direction of his story.

Linking these biographies also reveals an interesting intra-generational pattern. Whereas Seyde firmly incorporated herself into the Syriac community and its historical grief in Turkey, Simon made very few explicit references to this aspect. In his account the "community" became largely associated with forces of social control. In many ways his and other young people's stories suggested that it was them much more than their immigrant parents who negotiated the Syriacs' incorporation into Austrian society. Simon's description of a model life-path marked by educational and professional success was a much wider theme, and it connoted more than the desire for individual self-realisation. It reflected the involvement of children in the project of migration as an aspiration for upward social mobility. He suggested that his parents had put him in a position to fulfil what they themselves had not been able to realise. Performing to his parents' expectation was tantamount to making a moral commitment to the family and its standing and continuity, including that of its ethnic identity. In challenging these expectations he knew he was challenging moral orders of filiation and the parent-child relationship itself. In both Seyde and Simon's negotiations of family relations community history became visible as morally charged. It implicated them as people whose choices had been circumscribed by the threat to the Suryoye as a *people* (in Turkey and through dispersal) and whose actions were morally tied to the 'ethnic' survival of both family and community.

Whilst this case speaks of a conflictual intergenerational process, many others I came across in my research did not. However, what they mostly shared was the subtext of historical change that revolved around the negotiation of inter-familial social norms. At biographical level it transpired in how far the history of community endangerment informed an individual's way of looking at the world. However, only through following close social links some insight

could be gained into the extent to which community history affected intimate social ties and their emotional and moral fabric. When historical experience becomes intimate knowledge and implicated in a network of connected lives, history becomes personal and embodied. "Linked biographies" open a door to understanding these processes and the ways in which people mediate the ever changing worlds they live in. ■

Notes

1. Syriac Christianity has its roots in the early Christian communities of the Eastern Mediterranean. The community I address here belong to the Syriac Orthodox Church. Their ancient homeland is in a region called Tur Abdin, in south-east Turkey.

2. Inverted commas indicate that family can have many definitions. I use the term here to refer to people related by kin.

3. See also Bertaux and Delcroix (2000) for more methodological detail; Bauer and Thompson [2004] for a more recent study.

4. E.g., Chamberlain and Leydesdorff, 2004; Erel, 2009; Gardner, 2002. The intergenerational "linking" of biographies discussed so far relates to "generation" in genealogical rather than sociological terms. The notion of "generation" in migration scholarship can be confusing; there is a routine assumption that "migrant generations" are formed through the act of migration. This prioritises the vantage point of the immigration society for whom migrants are to-be-assimilated subjects who are locked into a generational order ("first generation", "second generation" etc.) that hinges on their relationship to this society. Without developing this argument here, it is important to caution against the assumption that the act of "migra-

tion" is the central transformative act around which members of migrant families establish their historical consciousness. The Syriac case study here also challenges this idea.

5. This includes the possibility that life stories may offer very few reflections on history writ-large. As anthropologists have shown narrators may have lived through periods of profound historical upheaval without explicitly reflecting this experience in their accounts [Bird-David, 2004; Fassina et al, 2008].

6. For the social constructivist position in narrative research see Spector-Mersel, 2010; for narrative identity theories see De Fina, 2003.

7. See, e.g. Icduygu and Soner, 2006.

8. Whilst population statistics are imprecise the estimated population loss for the Syriac Orthodox Christians in the eastern Turkish provinces through massacre, flight and emigration in the 20th century is drastic, shrinking from about 130,000 before the First World War to about 3,000 today [cf. Gaunt, 2006: 24]. Currently the largest Syriac communities in Europe live in Germany (circa 80,000) and Sweden (circa 70,000), with smaller numbers in the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria and France. Today most Syriacs with roots in Turkey live outside Turkey.

9. Political change in Turkey has given rise to a small return movement and some

recent village renovation projects since around 2004.

10. Armbruster 2008; 2013.

11. These names are pseudonyms.

12. Aramaic term for the genocide in 1915-1916. It translates as "the sword".

13. This was a more common experience. Some Christian children survived as adoptees of Muslim families.

14. The kidnap of Christian girls by Muslims was generally perceived as a violent act against Christians as a group. These incidents were well known from periods of severe persecution, such as during the genocide, and also thereafter. During fieldwork it was common to hear about such incidents in oral history or in general conversations. However, it was difficult, to get a measure of actual numbers. The fear of kidnap was higher in places where the Christian community was very small and girls often married younger in these circumstances.

15. For reconstructed dialogue as a performance device see Baynham 2006.

16. Capitals indicate emphasis.

17. Later he explains this as an advantage because it allowed him to acquire native-speaker competence in German.

18. Austrian exam that qualifies for University study.

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ABSTRACT

Linked biographies in changing times. Syriac Christians in Vienna

This article examines the intersection between history and biography in an intergenerational context. It is based on ethnographic research among immigrant Syriac Christians in Vienna who originate from Turkey. Two historical experiences of crisis and rupture have been particularly relevant for identity construction: first the Christian massacres in eastern Anatolia in 1915-16 that depleted and traumatised the community; and second the massive processes of dispersal that set in with the migrations to Western Europe in the post-1960 period. In taking a narrative approach the paper looks at biographies as negotiations of history and belonging. It argues that the impact of history on personal lives is socially mediated and that a biographical perspective needs to take this into account, both methodologically and analytically. The ethnography draws on the family as a key context for such "linked biographies".

Keywords: Syriac Christians. Biographical narrative. Transmission. Community endangerment.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Historische Erfahrung im Spiegel vernetzter Biographien: Syrische Christen in Wien

Dieser Artikel untersucht die Verbindung zwischen Geschichte und Biographie in einem intergenerationalen Kontext. Die Fallstudie bezieht sich auf eine ethnographische Forschung mit syrischen Christen aus der Türkei in Wien. Diese Forschung hat gezeigt, daß vor allem zwei historische Ereignisse eine besondere Bedeutung für kollektive Identität haben. Erstens die Massaker an Armeniern und syrischen Christen in Ostanatolien 1915-16, die die Christen dezimierten und traumatisierten, und zweitens die massiven Auswanderungen nach West Europa in der Periode nach 1960, die eine neue Diaspora auslösten. Die Studie basiert auf einem narrativen Ansatz und untersucht Biographie als Verhandlung von Zugehörigkeit und kollektiver historischer Erfahrung. Sie argumentiert, daß historische Erfahrungen sozial verhandelt werden und dass biographische Ansätze diese sozialen Kontexte in einen methodologischen und analytischen Rahmen einbeziehen müssen. Dieser Ansatz der 'sozial vernetzten Biographie' wird illustriert im Bezug auf die Familie.

Stichwörter: Syrische Christen. Biographie und Narration. Intergenerationale Vermittlung von Geschichte. Verfolgungsgeschichte.