



Forced into Trade Out of Necessity: Working-Class Narratives on Petty Trade

Eija Stark

The peasant and the proletarian have been key concepts in studies of social change and modernization.¹ Peasants, farming a small piece of land with the aid of household labor and mainly for their own consumption, have been the enduring basis of agricultural production throughout history. Contrary to this, the proletarian has worked for wages with little or no control over the means of production. In terms of class position, collective action, and orientation regarding traditional values, these two groups have traditionally been distinguished from one another.² From the late nineteenth century onward, however, both the peasant and proletariat economies were increasingly based on multiple sources of income. The division between rural and urban work was not large, since the youth of the rural families worked seasonally in factories or industrial labor, whereas those in town often supplemented their daily wages by keeping cows and pigs for personal use at home.

The cultural experience of workers throughout Europe differed greatly from the master narrative of the Industrial Revolution, in large part due to

E. Stark (✉)

The Finnish Literature Society, Helsinki, Finland

e-mail: eija.stark@finlit.fi

© The Author(s) 2022

J. Ahlbeck et al. (eds.), *Encounters and Practices of Petty Trade in Northern Europe, 1820–1960*,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-98080-1_12

the triumph of the socialist movement. Compared to the United Kingdom or continental Western Europe, Finland's industrial development took place rather late, only in the late nineteenth century. Despite the exploitation of forests for timber and paper products, small-scale farming continued to be an important—if not the most important—source of livelihood. Rural livelihoods were fundamentally seasonal, and it was typical to combine factory work with farm work and small-scale trade of farm products that cut across urban and rural communities.³ This casual labor was an economic category that consisted of a complex and fluid combination of unskilled labor, the regular influx of the seasonally unemployed, seasonal farm servants and those brought up without any industrial skill or training.⁴ It goes without saying that the families involved in casual labor more and more commonly resorted to petty trade.

When casual workers resorted to petty trade or street vending, what kinds of livelihood strategies did they then employ? This chapter introduces three working-class individuals and their multiple sources of income, presented in their life stories, and seeks to trace the ways in which the casual laborers who likewise performed agricultural chores interacted with rising capitalist power structures.⁵ Due to the scarcity of resources, the everyday struggle for one's livelihood had a central role in the lives of the poor working class, and because of rapid economic development and liberalization, a quick expansion of goods offered new income opportunities. The focus is thus on the life stories and the narratives therein on financial struggles. From the perspective of "the new history from below," combined with narrative analysis, this chapter sheds light on the agency of working-class individuals and their understanding of small-scale trade as a form of livelihood. It also points to the multifaceted "folk" as economic actors and discusses vernacular narratives as a critical discourse vis-à-vis the rise of capitalism.

THE CASUAL WORKERS AND THEIR LIFE STORIES

Struggles over livelihoods are analyzed from the life stories of Ida (b. 1900), Anto (b. 1914) and Jouko (b. 1926), all of whom had direct insight into the destitute and rural lifeways in Finland. In addition, they belonged to the generations that witnessed the poor peasant state of Finland transforming into a modern and technologically advanced welfare state. However, telling one's life is not the same as living life. Human life is incoherent; it consists of confusion, contradictions, and ironies, as well

as indecisiveness, repetition, and reversions. Narrating a life story is the process of organizing experience and making sense of life.⁶ By definition, a story is a structured narrative. It has a beginning, middle and end. Some incidents and phases of life are emphasized more than others. A life story is thus an artifact, and the construction of this artifact occurs by transforming the chaos of lived, everyday life into straightforward, one-dimensional prose.

Following oral historian Alessandro Portelli, Ken Plummer argues that “life stories are not and cannot be objective: they are always ‘artificial, variable and partial’. But, at the same time [...] this does not weaken them. We may even know that some statements are factually wrong: and yet such ‘wrong’ statements may still be psychologically ‘true’: ‘this truth may be equally as important as factually reliable accounts.’”⁷ As cultural performances, personal narratives are more traditional than innovative. They rely on some individual resources, but most of these are influenced to some degree by collective models, and all are within the range of “safe creation.”⁸ Certain types of stories conventionally tend to have extended reportability. These include, for example, stories about career milestones, marriage, and major illnesses. For example, one such kind in Ida’s, Anto’s and Jouko’s life stories is their first “real job” and the paycheck received from it. Such matters are relevant and reportable over a major segment of one’s life, and, indeed, involve just those events that must be communicated in order that one other event may be known.⁹

Life stories construct a relationship between childhood and adolescence in the past and the elderly narrator in the present. In the context of contemporary material wellbeing and food security, stories of economic hardships and the absolute poverty of the past represent experiences that needed to be told. Poverty, lack of food and the urgent need for work are the narrative events that mark phases in the narrators’ life.¹⁰ In the course of Ida’s, Anto’s and Jouko’s lifetimes, social identity has been a matter of negotiating the differing group identities that they have maintained. Individuals are constructed by their past, but at the same time they reconstruct, reinterpret and re-remember the past based on present-situation categories that they use to structure their identities and their worldview.¹¹ From the researcher’s point of view, the life-story method focuses on the individual, conforming to dominant Western psychological models that emphasize the private nature of self-knowledge, with the result that people remember their past as if it was a drama in which the protagonist is the focus of the plot and determines the storyline.¹²

The life stories of Ida, Anto and Jouko represent the source type that researchers have specifically gathered with a wider, usually literary, or social-scientific goal in mind. Anto's and Jouko's life stories originate from an autobiographical writing contest for Finnish men organized by the Finnish Literature Society's Archives together with the Council for Gender Equality in 1992. According to the call, ordinary people were encouraged to write about their lives in their own style, describing "frankly and openly" what it is like to be a Finnish man. The life-writing contest was thus a method targeting so-called ordinary people, as opposed to celebrities and professional writers, to write about their lives. The guidelines encouraged authors to start with their childhood and their family background, and then their later adult life up until the time of writing.

In contrast to those of Anto and Jouko, Ida's life story belongs to the Finnish Labor Archives' oral history collections, which contains oral histories and ethnographic questionnaires of Finnish working-class communities and individual members. Throughout the decades, Ida was one of the most active respondents regarding the questionnaires that the Labor Archives' oral history and labor tradition commission organized. The common feature for Ida, Jouko and Anto is that, although lacking a formal education, they had been interested in literature and history, and they actively read both prose literature and newspaper. Often, as the authors mentioned, their life story was written with careful thought and awareness of an audience reading the archives. The ability to read and write has become central to modern living as signifying the normality of our culture. Yet it is with the arrival of print, the rise of leisure time and the slow emergence of a culture of individualism putting more emphasis on one's individual life that the written tale of a self has become more common.

In addition to specific genre features, from rags to riches, is the most prevalent theme in the life stories of the generation born in the beginning of the twentieth century. People found it appropriate to narrate their experiences of "behind the scenes" strategies for coping with poverty. Life as a singular narrative unit can also be considered as *the history from below*, which reevaluates individual experience and considers ordinary common people as active agents in shaping their own history and culture.¹³ Compared to traditional labor history studies, study of "the history from below" is more interested in shared expressions and vernacular culture than the actual organizations of the working class.¹⁴ Working-class people may challenge middle-class accounts of their lives that presume to know their needs and worldviews. It is important to note how individuals

consider themselves and what they are, and how they envision themselves as persons and type of workers.

The point of departure in this chapter is the assumption that the three casual workers use narrative resources to construct and negotiate their understanding of their economic position. The authors authentically represent the working class in the sense that not one of them had a profound connection to land. Therefore, the concept of “working class” is not a top-down concept but is perceived here as the narrators describe their lives and the choices they made. Although people sought livelihoods from various sources, such as smallholding farm works, industries, and petty trade, at the same time they became aware of new understandings of economic opportunities and consumption.

The first part focuses on petty trade as the example of marginal expedients for earning a living, and it discusses the entwined nature of working-class livelihoods and the rise of capitalist behavior. The second part focuses on the gendered culture of making and selling self-made goods door-to-door. A broad unskilled segment of society was accustomed to doing farm work, such as milking, animal care and plowing, but not to manufacture and sell goods. This made sporadic petty trade difficult, if not impossible. The gendered division of labor was related to spatial differences, and the male spheres of work were usually outside the farm or the dwelling place. The latter part of this chapter discusses how petty trade was organized in terms of items and selling habits at the time that this geography of gender divisions of labor was maintained.

PETTY TRADE AS THE LAST RESORT

The oldest of the narrators was Ida, born in 1900 in a textile industry town in South Finland. She was one of the most active respondents in the oral history and labor tradition ethnographic collections of the Finnish Labor Archives. Not only did she write memoirs and respond at length to various questionnaires, but the archivists also interviewed her. Ida was an ideal informant: she took seriously her role of giving cultural insights into the so-called working-class ways of life and mentalities. During her later years, she became the author of a fictional book based on her life. In her written life story, preserved in the archives, Ida talks about her background. Her father was a poor crofter whose first wife died, leaving him a widower with five children, four of whom later passed away as well. Her father ended up as an itinerant petty trader and at the age of fifty, he met

Ida's mother, who was a factory worker 26 years younger than he was. This was around 1890, during the time when young women played a significant role among migrants in the textile industry.¹⁵

The act of telling is a performance that positions the narrator and the audience. Ida is narrating to the reader, in other words, intending her life story to be read by someone, stating: "I have told you about my father, although he was not touched upon the labor movement. I wanted to tell you about my father because he was the previous generation of the actual political labor movement. Now I tell you about my mother, even though she did not belong to the labor movement either." Compared to history as a reconstruction of the past in the present, stories such as Ida's reflect this complexity and possibilities more freely. The concept of narrative includes the idea of interaction. The concept of story ownership refers to a relationship between a teller and a listener or a reader, and between a narrative and event.¹⁶ Ida is highly aware of being the agent of her life story and identifies the addressee in making her narration dialogic. She explains why her parents were important in the rise of working-class consciousness, something that she herself had.

Ida's childhood was "extremely poor" and her parents barely coped with their meager living. Her father got a house loan, with which he was able to build a house for his family. He worked as a garbage-collecting driver, a job where he could collect other people's cast outs and put them to good use at his construction site. Besides job flexibility, as Sigrid Wadauer has argued, geographic mobility was a basic feature of earning one's bread.¹⁷ Within the family unit, there used to be social roles that the family members took on and which were assigned to everyone, depending on their birth order and sex (see Fig. 12.1). The mother sent Ida's older siblings door to door to beg for food for the rest of the family. Ida, as the youngest child, was lucky to avoid begging. Later, when they were old enough, the older siblings were expected to leave the homecroft. Although the family kept hens that offered some support in livelihoods, the mother also sewed *siro* skirts for sale at home. "Siros" were the end bits of rolls of fabric and textiles, which were given away almost for free from the stores held by factories. These end bits were exploited, especially among the poor factory workers if they could sew. By selling their family pig, Ida's mother took out a loan to buy a sewing machine. After selling some skirts, Ida's mother was able to pay down the loan and put some bread on the table. This kind of economic activity benefited household producers, who



Fig. 12.1 A peddler boy in the northern coastal town of Oulu, Finland, in 1932. Working-class oral histories often disclose how parents occasionally had to send their children to peddle in order to secure the livelihood of the family. Children evoked more sympathy and managed thus to sell hand-made goods, such as cruets. (Photo by Samuli Paulaharju. Finnish Heritage Agency)

could only compete with factory production by accepting less pay for more work.¹⁸

Besides the bulk of daily work, the perspective on life may have been different between the family members. Whereas Ida's mother could read and write, and she was a serious Christian, her father, who was not religious and did not want to attend the Sunday services, was barely literate. It is possible that orientation toward novelties or ideologies related to other forms of mentalities, too. In Ida's case, literacy and being open to heterogeneous economic opportunities probably went hand in hand for her mother, who was significantly younger than Ida's father.

The second narrator, Anto, was born in West Finland in 1914. The oldest of three children, at the age of six he lost his father. Just before his accidental death in the port of Mäntyluoto, Anto's father had bought a little house for the family, where they would continue to live. In addition to his mother and the three young children, Anto's maternal grandmother

lived in the same dwelling. His father had done odd jobs, such as being as a sailor, working in the port and using a small schooner to organize boat transportation services on the local sea. After his father's death, due to no one having the required skills, Anto's mother sold the schooner. For her livelihood, Anto's mother bought a used loom, with which she started to make woollen shirts, coats, socks and "all kinds of stuff." She got the materials, such as wool and yarn, from their neighbors. In this way, she was able to provide for and nurture the family of five.

Anto contributed to provide livelihood in many ways: working in a seine fishing group as a helping hand (earning three shovels of herring for his daily salary), knitting fishnets and woollen socks (a skill taught by his grandmother), and selling newspapers and religious magazines on a street corner. Evidently, the livelihood strategies of the early twentieth-century working-class family were manifold; they reflected a combination of rural and urban possibilities. The boundary between the spheres was not absolute or rigid, but flexible and complementary. Migrating from the country to towns did not involve a major recasting of the ordinary people's worldview or ways of life. Furthermore, the labor-intensive and often unmechanized nature of work in towns made it relatively easy for people with a rural background to adjust to the new working patterns.¹⁹ If the opportunity to earn one's own living in rural livelihoods was limited, then factory communities—that is, a larger population in a relatively small area and the commerce there—offered odd jobs as well as chances for a small business.

Life nevertheless entailed constant struggling since nothing seemed secure or permanent. The importance of social capital helped people to cope with poverty, and sometimes mere luck enabled new livelihood practices. This was the case when Anto received a little saw as a Christmas present from his friend. He started to prepare items, such as cruets and photo frames, from veneer plywood. He made these at home at the end of the kitchen table. After making two boxes of these, he went selling his products by going door to door in the nearby villages. Anto explains his decision to sell elsewhere than his community: "It was a kind of shyness that prevented me to sell my items in my local village." The marketplace usually required social interaction that was formulaic and traditional.²⁰ Places of trade provided both literal and metaphoric space for performances, and the role of a seller was unknown to the rural working-class people, who were more accustomed to labor as farmhands and servants. Although Anto succeeded in selling his products, he had no desire to do it again: "It was such an experience that I did not want to go to the same

place anymore.” Therefore, he ended his short career in itinerant door-to-door sales but continued making veneer plywood items that he sold to his mother’s customers every now and then.

In every instance or narrative setting, identity is determined by contrast and contact with others. In his story, Anto constructed himself as a self-reliant, middle-class man, who, through careful planning and goal orientation, aimed at a good education and entrepreneurship. He positioned himself in a meritocracy and monetary economy. At the age of eleven, Anto found employment at the local lumber mill; he worked there regularly during the summers and earned his first own money. With this help, the family was able to repair their house, which had always remained unfinished. And with his very first cash salary, Anto was also able to buy a bicycle from the local parish village. He could still remember the exact price of the bike. In the countryside, it was still common to pay in kind, and for the poorest strata of society—such as Ida, Anto and Jouko—money transactions were rare. In addition to the increase of wealth in his family, Anto made plans for further education, which were supported by his mother. He applied to a cooking school in Helsinki, where he was accepted. As the case of Anto shows, odd jobs and variable life events were not merely a reflection of a changing society or a society in transition. On the individual level, they were sudden and unanticipated opportunities from which one was able to benefit.

The third narrator is Jouko, who was born in 1926 in North Finland. There were five members in his family. His father worked at the timber mill and did odd jobs, while his mother took care of the family’s rural dwelling place, was responsible for the home chores and rented rooms to itinerant workers. The family moved frequently due to bad economic times, however. On the eve of the Great Depression of the 1930s, Jouko’s father lost his job on a tugboat and became unemployed. He started making small wooden handiwork from veneer plywood—cruets, towel racks and shelves—that he sold in nearby areas. When those places became saturated, new destinations for trade had to be found. This was the impetus for investing in a small stall, where all that the family owned was packed. They attempted to squeeze a meagre profit from selling self-made products. Because Jouko’s family did not have a long-term fixed abode, they were dependent on the goodwill of locals to accommodate them. Compared to the itinerant Finnish Roma, the begging practiced by ethnic Finns found overnight shelter more easily at farmhouses.²¹ Jouko, who was but a young boy at the time of the Great Depression, says that his family acted more like beggars than petty traders.

ILLEGAL TRADE AS THE SOURCE OF HUMOROUS TALES

Livelihood narratives within the life stories contain elements of social crime. They resemble social banditry, a phenomenon where individuals living on the edges of rural society, doing petty crime or other illegal acts to survive, were often seen by ordinary people as heroes.²² Found usually in semi-industrial peasant societies or frontier societies, social banditry not only motivated certain forms of political resistance against oppressive regimes and social hierarchies, but also functioned as a channel of upward social mobility. According to Eric Hobsbawm, who introduced the concept, banditry was a form of self-help and means of escaping the exploitation that existed between the rural working class and the ruling elite.²³

Unlike folktale tradition, where outlaw heroes such as Robin Hood or Pancho Villa display some level of wit or style, or evoke sympathy that distinguishes them from the common criminal or simply from the crowd,²⁴ in the life story a bandit is the narrator or someone from their family. Stories of banditry provide an accessible way to understand the social context of livelihood struggles, sometimes consisting of unlawful acts, which took place at home and in community settings. For example, Jouko's parents found a house to rent in the town where his father got a job at the timber mill, and his mother was hired as a mixer and carrier of mortar for bricks. Soon, however, his father became unemployed, and ended up stealing from the shops and granaries; for example, he stole a sack of grain and then the next morning sold it to a local shop. Displays of sudden wealth in Jouko's family were manifold; at Christmas, they all got presents and delicious food to eat. He explains: "Although this happened during the Great Depression and the poorest people in the countryside really suffered, my family succeeded in moving to a better house. The new house had a kitchen and a living room, and it was located just next to the rich, big-bellied Pihlgren's house." Even though the family was wealthier than ever, due to his father's thefts, Jouko and his mother continued working as farmhands in the bigger farmhouses.

In the spring, when Jouko's father stole a bicycle, he was caught and sent to prison for three months. Along with the rest of his family, Jouko had to move out of their nice house to a sauna building. He remembers: "The family was dependent on mother's small income as well as poor relief. Often, we ate potatoes in herring water which I had asked for from the local workers' cooperative store. It did not cost anything. If I happened to find some bread, mice often had gnawed it and it smelled bad.

But if you cut the mice's bite off, it was edible." Unlike Anto, who kept living together with his mother and grandmother in the same parish village and was able to cultivate his social contacts, the constant moving of Jouko's family prevented them from forming close and lasting relationships that might provide support in times of dearth. In this manner, Jouko's story is more proletarian than Anto's, since in Jouko's household the tie between property and family was broken and weakening family bonds promoted greater geographical mobility.²⁵

In all three life stories, experiences with petty trade represent hardships in life that are worth sharing. For example, Jouko's mother dealt alcohol on the black market. Peddling, even the illegal type, was part of a make-shift economy. Its forbidden aspect provides the story with narrative value, that is, *tellability*.²⁶ In school, Jouko was bullied for his parish clothing given as poor relief. He occasionally skipped class and went begging instead: "I begged after my school days. I often got a whole rucksack full of food, which I could carry home. Every time I was hungry, begging was my only option. Once, during Christmas time, I got my sledge full of food and a big pile of clothes for my little sister." Besides begging, Jouko went door to door and sold homemade soap. People usually bought it, because he was so little and brutally honest when asked about his family's economic problems. At the same time, he was rewarded for telling private details—that is, gossiping—which was a powerful tool of social control in the small communities.

Through increased uncertainty and poverty, survivalist and opportunist strategies were developed.²⁷ For example, the extent of informal door-to-door or street trading increased in times of economic decline.²⁸ Ways of petty crime were shared as the uttermost livelihood strategy. The three narrators did not see their illegal acts as serious crime. Selling alcohol on the black market was one way to make do, as Jouko explains: "It was during the Prohibition [1919–1932] when intense transportation of rectified spirit from the sea to inland occurred. Although dangerous, my father got excited about this business." In the narratives, resorting to informal economic activities to earn one's livelihood was considered a sign of wits and great ability to get through hardships. In this manner, the outlaw hero served as the construction of oneself as being able to cope with hard times.

Interestingly, those who resorted to the illegal economy implicitly agreed that these economic activities were not morally acceptable, but because of poverty and due to the moral values of the narrative moment, illegal trade could not be considered serious. One such story is the

following: "At night, father and Kalle went to the nearby forest where they collected broken dry branches from fallen trees. The local farm master had given permission to collect twigs and sticks, but those branches that my father and Kalle carried on their shoulder were more logs than sticks." As part of narrating the self, the criminal behavior of the past is not apologized for, underestimated, or exaggerated. The ways in which livelihoods were provided reflect the flexibility in social and economic change. Alternative employment possibilities were frequently sought after, and this kind of economic behavior sought not to maximize income but to ensure that all family members were adequately fed and employed.²⁹

GENDERED SPACE AND MATERIALS

Much like the self-sufficiency of the peasant, forms of economic behavior and petty trade were culturally constitutive. In the peasant economy based on patriarchal and patrilineal systems, work was delineated in gender-specific terms and self-made products were denoted as the responsibility of women as opposed to men.³⁰ Usually, men oversaw grain and animal meat, whereas women had control over dairy products as well as growing vegetables and roots and picking berries. The "feminine foodstuff" was bartered and sold at the market by women.³¹ Hence, in terms of gender, items of economic exchange were differentiated. Although economic behavior represented a modern phenomenon and widened the traditional female sphere especially, it nevertheless continued to pass down age-old gendering practices that were often linked to materiality. Women sold the products they could prepare due to their upbringing and learning of history in home chores. Small-scale trade was often a last resort for Ida, Jouko and Anto, perhaps due to their strong cultural pattern of peasant self-sufficiency or, alternatively, of factory worker paternalism. However, when small-scale economic activity was carried out, it was gendered. Thus, due to the importance of material conditions, exchanges and productions for identity processes, forms of social formations such as households and social hierarchies occurred simultaneously according to traditions.³²

What, then, was the gendered boundary within working-class petty trade? According to the narrators, men (or boys) purchased manufactured fabrics, trinkets and small items, whereas women sold homemade products. Ida narrates at length about her drunken husband, who desperately tried to find a suitable livelihood for the family. Ida was a factory worker, and her husband did odd jobs that, in terms of the labor hierarchy, were

considered low status. Another time he was again sacked from his job, and with his last salary, he wanted to invest in goods that he could then sell as an itinerant trader. He was inspired by his brother-in-law, Ida's brother, who occasionally visited them on his trading tours. After seeing the brother-in-law counting his money, Ida's husband wanted to become an itinerant trader: "Now this fella [the husband] aspired to become rich doing the same thing. But he was not a salesman. With our sons, he only made one trading trip. He carried the sack but made our boys sell in the houses. There was neither big money when they returned nor fewer yarn skeins and combs. Late in the autumn, the boys still were selling these items after their schooldays. Hubby himself [that is, Ida's husband] found a new job making a road somewhere in the near area." Describing her marriage as an unbalanced relationship, Ida uses the euphemisms "hubby" and "fella" when referring to her husband. Without doubt, narratives in the form of half-public self-reflection serve as a performance act in reflecting on unsatisfactory conditions inside the family.

In addition to Ida's life-story collection, which contains several documents written over the years, there are newspaper and journal articles on Ida in the archive collections. She gained local fame after getting her autobiographical writings published as a novel. The book merged her autobiographical accounts with fictional elements. Besides her handwritten life-story, the archives have files of interviews with and media presentations about Ida. In one of the interviews, she tells how her husband's alcohol use was the hardest experience in her life. Hence, Ida was the provider of the family: "The family economy was upheld by Ida and for the sake of her imaginativeness. At the worst moments she even did some paintings that she asked her sons to sell door to door." Again, men and boys, not women, sold ready-made items when going door to door.

It is interesting how in her life story Ida tells how she was the head of the family, the de facto breadwinner, because her husband was obsessed with alcohol and weak in decision-making. However, in the media interview, the journalist—a male—describes their family according to the patriarchal ideal, with the man being the breadwinner and decision-maker of the household. "Laughing easily, sweet Ida is slightly tense in her first interview ever, but Lauri [the husband] just keeps smoking calmly. As a retired bricklayer, Lauri obviously leads the family. When Ida gets confused, he jumps into the talk and helps her forward." Unlike the life-story narratives, the interview gives a different view of the dynamics of the couple. Moreover, Ida's published book is presented as the result of the

husband's strong will and fearless nature: "Obviously the book would not have existed without Lauri's intervention, because Ida was losing her courage many times." In addition to marriage, small-scale trading activities with the help of their sons were depicted differently in the life-story and in the magazine interview.

Without doubt, gender shaped practices of petty trade. The men's sphere was not only geographically wider but also provided multiple possibilities to purchase items. Soon after the Second World War, Jouko got a job in a textile factory. The factory had its own store for the workers, where they could buy items freely without wartime ration stamps. Jouko bought some fabric and then had it made into his first tailor-made suit. Soon he met a man selling old Finnish army tents, who mentioned that they were good material for overalls, that is, working clothes: "Instead of asking where he had got these tents, I bought one tent which I thought was cheap. I started to sell this tent fabric by the meter from house to another. Due to the wartime shortage of clothes, I was successful in my trade. I traveled around the country and money came in. I stayed in hotels and lived like a master." As in Jouko's case, narratives on petty trade might sometimes describe events, the details of people, and the dialogues with them very precisely. This occurs especially when something successful has been achieved. Although based at times on stretching the laws and uncertain times, success needed to be included in the narrative because it is part of the narrator's present self. Therefore, narratives work as a technique in self-production.

In time, Jouko became so rich that he could afford his father's funeral. His father had spent the rest of his life in prison. Soon thereafter, Jouko changed careers and started to work as a driver and then, after the war, at odd jobs like in the army, in the plywood industry and as a bricklayer at a construction site. Just as petty trade represented a sudden chance, Jouko's entire life seemed to be individual and "free." His career choices were probably not so much about explicit decisions and goal-oriented actions, but rather seizing the moment without concern for the future. Compared to Ida, Jouko's petty trade included social encounters and the ability to manage his work in sales. Moreover, small-scale trade demanded wit. More profoundly, the stories of petty trade reflect the condition of a society where men had more freedom and, unlike women, they were able to be independent early on.

CONCLUSIONS

Working-class livelihoods consisted of manifold sources, depending on the season and geographical location. Ida, Anto and Jouko were self-employed workers in terms of making and selling things, although they all worked occasionally at factories or on farms. From the early twentieth century onward, many kinds of odd jobs increased, along with the rise of capitalism and wage earning. Despite their rural background, Ida, Jouko and Anto as self-employed workers had little control over production. They were all dependent wage earners, or “disguised proletarians.”³³

One strategy for survival among the poorest people was petty trade. However, this was a last resort rather than a livelihood activity that was sought after. The items that were sold by people who were not skilled in craftsmanship included small wood products and self-made dresses. Not only were the items gendered—that is, men prepared things cut out of wood and women made dresses and clothes out of fabric—but the selling activities were as well. Sales took place outside the home and, as both male authors stressed, often outside one’s own village. While petty trade was practiced by both genders, mobile petty trade was reserved for men. Undoubtedly, women were much more likely than men to be the victims of sexual harassment and sexual assault and, therefore, geographically mobile selling was not a viable option for women. Moreover, common views on what was considered a respectable livelihood did not encourage people to become a petty trader, since that was an occupation practiced by the stigmatized groups of the Finnish society, that is, Roma, Russians, or Jews (see Wassholm in this volume).

Another narrative theme within the life-stories regarding petty trade is social banditry. Originally, the term was introduced to describe those persons regarded by official society and the authorities as outlaws, but who remained within the bounds of the moral order of the peasant communities. Although banditry was illegal, locals usually viewed bandits as heroes. In the working-class livelihood narratives, the elements of social banditry appear in the form of petty theft by a person acting alone, not in a group. In this sense, social banditry was neither violent nor revolutionary. Moreover, the hero of the story tended to be the narrator or a close relative, such as either of one’s parents. Tolerant and partly humorous attitudes toward crimes in the past can be explained by the own narrator’s position as poor; even necessitating committing illegal acts at times, struggling for one’s livelihood and surviving in a destitute state required wits.

The original idea of social banditry by Hobsbawm suggested certain conditions of existence for the mode of primitive rebellion, primary among these being the presence of a traditional peasant environment and the absence of industrial capitalism. In their life stories, Ida, Jouko and Anto describe the period of social and economic change that transformed Finland from a rural peasant society into an industrial one. Therefore, it may be presumed that social banditry as the narrative theme had already merged with the stereotypical character of a trickster, who appears in mythology and folklore.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Charles Tilly. 1984. "Demographic origins of the European proletariat"; Pertti Haapala. 1986. *Tehtaan valossa. Teollistuminen ja työväestön muodostuminen Tampereella 1820–1920*.
2. Roberts 1990, pp. 353–354.
3. Heikkinen 1997, p. 38.
4. E.g., Jankiewicz 2012, p. 395.
5. A Marxist approach to folklore is relatively rare among folklorists and ethnologists. There are a few who do engage it, however, such as José Limón. 1983. "Western Marxism and Folklore: A Critical Introduction" and Willow G. Mullins and Puja Batra-Wells (eds.). 2019. *The Folklorist in the Marketplace. Conversations at the Crossroads of Vernacular Culture and Economics*.
6. Schely-Newman 2009, p. 2.
7. Plummer 2001, p. 401; see also Portelli 1998, pp. 72, 68.
8. Stahl Dolby 1989, pp. 17–19.
9. Linde 1993, p. 23.
10. E.g., Charlotte Linde. 2015. "Memory in Narrative."
11. Andrews 1991, p. 65; Saltzman 1994, p. 107.
12. Andrews 2007, p. 53.
13. Lyons 2013, p. 16.
14. Anna Kuismin and M. J. Driscoll. 2013. *White Field, Black Seeds—Nordic Literacy Practices in the Long Nineteenth Century*.
15. Haapala 1986, p. 215.
16. Shuman 2015, p. 42.
17. Wadauer 2012, p. 225.
18. Dawley and Faler 1977, p. 471.
19. E.g., Magnússon 2011, p. 193.
20. Mullins and Batra-Wells 2019, p. 13.

21. Eija Stark. 2020. "Stories on the food-begging Roma: Boundary making in the Finnish peasant homes."
22. Eric Hobsbawn first introduced these concepts. See Eric Hobsbawn. 1959. *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*; Eric Hobsbawn. 1969. *Bandits*.
23. Hobsbawn 1969, p. 19.
24. Seal 2009, p. 74.
25. E.g., Roberts 1990, p. 363.
26. Ochs and Capps 2001, pp. 33–34.
27. E.g., Little 2014, p. 47.
28. Van den Heuvel 2012, p. 136.
29. E.g., Roberts 1990, p. 356.
30. Worobec 2008, pp. 85–87.
31. E.g., Ann-Catrin Östman. 2000. *Mjök och jord. Om kvinnlighet, manlighet och arbete i ett österbottniskt jordbrukssamhälle ca 1870–1940*; Pirjo Markkola. 1989. "Maaseudun työläisvaimot."
32. Van Gent and Toivo 2016, p. 263; Eirinn Larsen and Vibeke Kieding Banik, 2016. "Mixed feelings: Women, Jews, and business around 1900."
33. See, e.g., Roberts 1990, p. 364.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Finnish Literature Society Archives, Materials on Traditional and Contemporary Culture, Autobiography collections of Satasärmäinen nainen and Eläköön mies. The Labour Archives, the narrative collection of the Commission of Finnish Labour Tradition.

LITERATURE

- Andrews, Molly. *Lifetimes of Commitment: Ageing, Politics, Psychology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Andrews, Molly. *Shaping History: Narratives of Political Change*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Ashton, William A. "What would Hermes do? A Jungian perspective on the trickster and business ethics." In *The Folklorist in the Marketplace: Conversations at the Crossroads of Vernacular Culture and Economics*, edited by Willow G. Mullins and Puja Batra-Wells, 234–251. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2019.

- Dawley, Alan, and Paul Faler. "Working-Class Culture and Politics in the Industrial Revolution: Sources of Loyalism and Rebellion." *Journal of Social History* 9, no. 4 (1977): 466–480.
- Haapala, Pertti. *Tehtaan valossa. Teollistuminen ja työväestön muodostuminen Tampereella 1820–1920*. Tampere: Vastapaino, 1986.
- Heikkinen, Sakari. *Labour and the Market: Workers, Wages and Living Standards in Finland 1850–1913*. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1997.
- Heuvel van Den, Danielle. "Selling in the shadows: peddlers and hawkers in early modern Europe." In *Working on Labor: Essays in Honor of Jan Lucassen*, edited by Marcel van der Linden, Leo Lucassen and Jan Lucassen, 123–151. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- Hobsbawn, Eric. *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1959.
- Hobsbawn, Eric. *Bandits*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1969.
- Jankiewicz, Stephen. "A dangerous Class: The Street Sellers of Nineteenth-Century London." *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 2 (2012): 391–414.
- Kuismin, Anna and M. J. Driscoll (eds.). *White Field, Black Seeds — Nordic Literacy Practices in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2013.
- Larsen, Eirinn and Vibeke Kieding Banik. "Mixed feelings: Women, Jews, and business around 1900." *Scandinavian Journal of History* 41, no. 3 (2016): 350–368.
- Limón, José. "Western Marxism and Folklore: A Critical Introduction." *Journal of American Folklore* 96, no. 379 (1983): 34–52.
- Linde, Charlotte. *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Linde, Charlotte. "Memory in Narrative." *The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Blackwell, 2015.
- Little, Peter D. *Economic and Political Reform in Africa: Anthropological Perspectives*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014.
- Lyons, Martin. *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c.1860–1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Magnússon, Sigurður Gylfi. "The Life of a Working-Class Woman: selective modernization and microhistory in early 20th-century Iceland." *Scandinavian Journal of History* 36, no. 2 (2011): 186–205.
- Markkola, Pirjo. "Maaseudun työläisvaimot." In *Tunteimatton työläisnainen*, edited by Leena Laine and Pirjo Markkola, 39–60. Tampere: Vastapaino, 1989.
- Mullins, Willow G., and Puja Batra-Wells (eds.). *The Folklorist in the Marketplace: Conversations at the Crossroads of Vernacular Culture and Economics*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2019.
- Ochs, Elinor, and Lisa Capps. *Living Narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

- Plummer, Ken. "The Call of Life Stories in Ethnographic Research." In *Handbook of Ethnography*, edited by Paul Atkinson, Amanda Coffey, Sara Delamont, John Lofland and Lyn Lofland, 395–406. London: SAGE, 2001.
- Portelli, Alessandro. "What makes oral history different." In *Oral History, Oral Culture, and Italian Americans*, edited by Luisa Del Giudice, 21–30. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998.
- Roberts, B. R. "Peasants and proletarians." *Annual Review of Sociology* 16 (1990): 353–377.
- Saltzman, Rachele H. "Folklore as Politics in Great Britain: Working-class Critiques of Upper-Class Strike Breakers in the 1926 General Strike." *Anthropological Quarterly* 67, no. 3 (1994): 105–121.
- Schely-Newman, Esther. "To break down the wall: Constructing a literate self." *Narrative Inquiry* 19, no. 1 (2009): 1–17.
- Seal, Graham. "The Robin Hood Principle: Folklore, History, and the Social Bandit." *Journal of Folklore Research* 46, no. 1 (2009): 67–89.
- Shuman, Amy. "Story Ownership and Entitlement." In *The Handbook of Narrative Analysis, First Edition*, edited by Anna De Vina and Alexandra Georgakopoulou, 38–56. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015.
- Stahl Dolby, Sandra. *Literary Folkloristics and the Personal Narrative*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Stark, Eija. "Stories on the food-begging Roma: Boundary making in the Finnish peasant homes." In *Food Identities at Home and on the Move: Explorations at the Intersection of Food, Belonging and Dwelling*, edited by Raúl Matta, Charles-Édouard Suremain and Chantal Crenn, 160–173. London: Routledge, 2020.
- Teubner, Melina. "Street food, urban space, and gender: Working on the streets of nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro (1830–1870)." *International Review of Social History* 64 (2019): 229–254.
- Tilly, Charles. "Demographic origins of the European proletariat." In *Proletarianization and Family History*, edited by D. C. Levine, 1–85. Orlando, FL: Academic Press, 1984.
- Van Gent, Jacqueline, and Raisa Maria Toivo. "Introduction. Gender, material culture and emotions in Scandinavian history." *Scandinavian Journal of History* 41, no. 3 (2016): 263–270.
- Wadauer, Sigrid. "Asking for the privilege to work: Applications for a peddling license (Austria in the 1920s and 1930s)." In *Poverty and Sickness in Modern Europe: Narratives of the Sick Poor, 1780–1938*, edited by Andreas Gestrich, Elizabeth Hurren and Steven King, 225–246. London and New York: Continuum, 2012.
- Worobec, Christine. "Peasantry." *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History*, 85–88. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Östman, Ann-Catrin. *Mjök och jord. Om kvinnlighet, manlighet och arbete i ett österbottniskt jordbruksamhälle ca 1870–1940*. Åbo: Åbo Akademis förlag, 2000.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

