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Being a Top Athlete in the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (1952-1964): A Biographical Viewpoint¹

Être athlète de haut niveau dans la République Socialiste d'Estonie (1952-1964) : un point de vue biographique

ABSTRACT : The aim of the article is to observe Soviet Estonian sport in the post-Stalinist period by using top athletes' life stories as empirical material. The author aims to study the athletes' memories in the current theoretical framework of ethnologists, who investigate Soviet everyday life. Accordingly, it is argued here that after Stalin's death and high-totalitarian period, came a period of mature socialism lasting for several decades. While in this period of stabilization ordinary people focused on their private life in their life stories, Soviet Estonian top athletes dialogue between their individual aims, the aims of the Soviet sport system and Estonian national discourse.

RÉSUMÉ : Le but de cet article est d'étudier le sport soviétique estonien dans la période post-stalinienne en utilisant comme matériau empirique des biographies d'athlètes. L'auteur s'efforce d'analyser les mémoires qu'ils nous ont laissés dans le cadre théorique des ethnologues travaillant sur la vie quotidienne soviétique. C'est pourquoi nous avançons l'idée qu'après la mort de Staline et la fin de la période marquant l'apogée du totalitarisme est venue une époque de maturation du socialisme qui a duré plusieurs décennies. Durant ces années de stabilisation, les gens ordinaires se sont focalisés sur leur vie privée et leur propre histoire tandis que les athlètes établissaient une sorte de compromis entre leurs objectifs personnels, ceux du sport soviétique et le discours national estonien.

KEYWORDS : Totalitarian Sport, Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic, Everyday Life of Mature Socialism, Oral History, Biographical Method.

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MOTS-CLÉS : Sport totalitaire, République socialiste soviétique d'Estonie, vie quotidienne dans le socialisme parvenu à maturation, histoire orale, méthode biographique.

“Through sport, I have reached self-realization, as sport is the symbiosis of arduous work, willpower and fighting spirit. I have had the possibility to travel widely, see various places, won many friends, acquaintances and most important – collected happy memories of competition moments for the rest of my life. What have I given to sport? I think that lots of energy, work and love. I wish the life to get better and our children, grandchildren, could live in a safe world of all possibilities. They should leave nothing incomplete because of politicians’ mistakes, as most important is work and the will for success, all else is secondary.” (Male athlete born in 1932)²

There are several motives for the present study. The first is the boom in writing and publishing life stories that abounded throughout Estonia after the country regained independence in 1991. Ene Kõresaar, an Estonian ethnologist, has pointed out that, at that period, life stories were considered first of all as the private memory of history, which was to catch up with the new, post-Soviet history writing.³ By presenting these life stories, the aim was to make public the so-called ‘real’ history of Estonians that would contrast with the strict censorship of history writing during the Soviet time and would be based on personal experiences of witnessed history. In the field of sport, the publication of biographical books has been especially dynamic. Below is a selection of biographical books that cover the period under study, by top athletes and coaches in the period from 1952-1964 (Table 1).

Table 1

Selection of biographical books about Estonian athletes (1998-2010)

- 1998 Paavo Kivine & Joann Lõssov, *Elu on mäng* (Life is a Game). Basketball player Joann Lõssov.
- 2002 Enn Mainla & Kalle Voolaid, *Kergejõustikule pühendatud elu* (Life Devoted to Athletics). Track and field coach Elmot Heido.
- 2002 Mart Vilt, *Elu otsimas* (Looking for Life). Track and field athlete Mart Vilt.

² Kairis Leinus, *Pikk jutuajamine pikamaajooksjaga* (A long conversation with a long distance runner) (Tartu, 1991), 17.

³ Ene Kõresaar, ‘Eluloolisest käsitlusviisist Eesti kultuuriteadustes’ (On biographical approach in Estonian cultural studies), in Tiit Jaago (ed.), *Pärimus ja tõlgendus. Artikleid folkloristika ja etnoloogia meetodite ning uurimispraktika alalt* (Tradition and interpretation. Papers on methods and practices in ethnology and folklore studies) (Tartu, 2003), 63.

- 2004 Mai Luik & Selma Teesalu, *Erna and Herbert Abel: suusatamine kogu elu* (Erna and Herbert Abel : Skiing for Life). Ski instructors Erna Abel and Herbert Abel.
- 2005 Mart Vilt, *Mälestustekett* (The Chain of Memories). Track and field athlete Mart Vilt.
- 2005 Tiit Lääne, *Johannes Kotkas*. Wrestler Johannes Kotkas.
- 2007 Aime Pärnakivi, *Legendaarne Hubert Pärnakivi* (The Legendary Hubert Pärnakivi). Track and field athlete Hubert Pärnakivi.
- 2007 Tiit Lääne, *Heino Lipp*. Track and field athlete Heino Lipp.
- 2008 Vello Lään, *Pikk blond mees palliga* (A Tall Blond Man with a Ball). Basketball player Ilmar Kullam.
- 2008 Tiit Lääne, *Ants Antson*. Speed skater Ants Antson.
- 2009 Paul Kuldkepp, *Tööle ja spordile pühendatud elu* (Life Devoted to Work and Sport). Wrestler Paul Kuldkepp.
- 2010 Ants Promet, *Unustatud unustamatud viiekümnendad* (Forgotten Unforgettable Fifties). Motor sportsman Ants Promet.

The structures of the biographies are different –there are life histories written by sports journalists compiled on archive material, biographical interviews in a form of a book and autobiographies of the athletes. For a small country, the number of texts is considerable and even disproportionately large if compared to the published sports books of other types. However, as can be seen in Table 1, most life stories of athletes were written and published more than a decade after regaining independence. First of all, the reason may be that the first wave of biographical books preferred other topics as World War II, the Soviet occupation, and deportations as these were perceived as more important in the society at the time. In the sports books of the 21st century, however, attention is focused on ‘professional activity’.

One explanation for the recent abundance of the life stories of the top athletes during that period might be the wish of sports circles to get rid of the reputation of ‘the Soviet athlete.’ During the Soviet period, the athletes’ achievements were generalized in the image of ‘the Soviet athlete’ (related to the general Soviet ideology), and thus the athletes wish to speak about their individual experience enables them to draw attention away from the social and political role of sport. For example, the titles of memoirs (and proceeding from this, the books’ subjects), such as ‘Life Devoted to Work and Sport’, ‘Life Devoted to Athletics’ or ‘Life is a Game’ (see Table 1) show first of all that the aim is a narrative of depoliticized sport. The universal practice in sport of coping with life is seen.

The second reason for this study concerns the unique features of the period. From the beginning of the 1950s to the beginning of the 1960s, the transition from Stalinism to the period of mature socialism⁴ took place in the Soviet Union. Therefore, in such discussions on the changing meanings of sport and of being active in sport, I find it helpful to use the concepts and approaches used by researchers studying Soviet everyday life who, amongst other things, examine how an individual adjusted to the Soviet regime. As a sports historian, I have defined the period under focus more precisely (1952-1964, with the corresponding Olympic Games), following the informants who used the Olympics or other large international competitions for periodization of their sporting life. The Soviet Union participated in the Olympic Games for the first time in Helsinki in Summer 1952. As many as twelve Estonians belonged to the Soviet Olympic team in Helsinki, which basically meant a new beginning in Estonian sport. For the top athletes, this meant new possibilities and challenges. One can see the importance of this event in the post-Soviet construction of memory narratives of sports people, who viewed their sports life as a relatively stable and fulfilling phase between 1952 and the end of the Soviet period and as such, it occupies a separate position between the pre-war and the current period of sports life.

The third motive for the present article is the excessive descriptiveness of Estonian sports history studies. The aim has always been to find out the ‘real’ historical truth. Life stories have also been used to confirm the facts of sports history. At the same time, that period has first of all been shaped by Estonian national and public understandings about the role of sport in the Soviet period. In brief, this is characterized in an authoritative collection of writings on Estonian history about the Soviet Estonian sport: ‘Nevertheless, Estonian sports life developed and over the decades athletes brought home several brighter medals. All this despite the fact that behind the border they had to compete under the red flag, i.e., as Russians.’⁵ My interpretation is that, proceeding from such moral pressure of public opinion, Estonian sports historians deal with the Soviet period by ‘excluding politics’. This means leaving the totalitarian society of the era as a mere background, as if the society has no relation with sport and is a separate realm. Alternatively, if the socio-political context is linked with sport in certain studies, the starting point is too often a national discourse, in which the features that go against the totalitarian regime are pointed out. In addition, by using extensive description, Estonian sports historians seem to wish to leave the authors’ opinions in the background and leave

⁴ See the concept on p. 5.

⁵ Sulev Vahtre (ed.), *Eesti ajalugu. VI, Vabadussõjast taasiseseisvumiseni* (The History of Estonia. Vol. VI: From the War of Independence until the Restoration of Independence) (Tartu, 2005), 351.

judgements to the readers alone. In an overview of Estonian sports history, sports journalist Sven Sommer sums it up in the following way: ‘Proceeding from this, the approach to the topic remains largely one of stating facts – we find that estimations should be given by bystanders and, first of all, by time. We have proceeded from facts and factual accuracy.’⁶

The question that remains for the present article is how an ordinary person builds up his /her life story in the present moment. The aim is to observe how top athletes, relying on their experience, see themselves and their athletic achievements in the context of social processes. How was the possible conflict between personal experience and today’s national discourses resolved in their life stories? More generally, what are the main factors that shape the narration of one’s life story? Moreover, I would like to introduce biographical methods into the study of Estonian sports history, which would offer one possibility for enriching current sports history writing through interdisciplinary research.

Biographies in Social Life

The empirical bases of the present article are the biographical interviews collected by the Estonian Society for Sports History and the Estonian Sports Museum⁷ and the published biographies as comparative material.⁸ In addition to the generation of athletes at their peak in 1952-1964, I use the memories of the direct post-World War II generation (1945-1951) for a better contextualization of the topic.⁹ The sources can be considered experience-centred topical narratives. In my present research, I will not focus on criticism or analysis of source collection. In the analysis of narratives, in my opinion, one should definitely consider a narrative’s interrelation between three periods and levels: the past (life story told by informant), the present (moment of narration) and the future (informant’s view of the future).

As a possibility for analysing narrative, I have used the concept of nostalgia. According to Maya Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko, who have studied post-socialist societies, the experience of childhood nostalgia is ‘pre-political’ and as such it does not require the justification of later practices. At the same time, the practices of adult

⁶ Sven Sommer (ed.), *Eesti Olümpiakomitee 75* (Estonian Olympic Committee 75) (Tallinn, 1998), 3.

⁷ Interviews in the Estonian Sports Museum (ESM) archives: ESM 3064:4 KK (manuscripts collection) 2166/F4-3/173; ESM 2469:6 KK 1732/F4-2/738; ESM 2708:12 KK 1893/F4-2/899; Records in the Estonian Society for Sport History archives: Uno Kajak (04.02.1998); Linda Kepp-Ojastu (02.09.1998).

⁸ For example see Table 1.

⁹ ESM 2772:13 KK 1994/F4-3/1; ESM 3064:1 KK 2165/F4-3/172, Aino-Eevi Lukas 21.04.2010, Arvo Putmaker 06.10.1999.

life in the Soviet society are politicized in memories, which need to be justified.¹⁰ To my mind, today's Estonian sports history writing approaches the Soviet period in the same way, whether with apolitical or 'political' nostalgia. All the negative aspects (totalitarian sports system, possible discrimination on the level of nationalities, etc.) is separated from nostalgia connected with sport. When talking about the childhood nostalgia of older generation Estonians, the concept of 'restorative nostalgia' coined by Svetlana Boym can be used. This concept stresses the truth derived from the past and which is used in the present. It also refers to the idea that the future holds power for us to achieve the goals of the present.¹¹ While in the case of Estonia, it is above all seen in the idealization of the pre-World War II Estonian society, the athlete of the Soviet period sees in his/her career the value of truth for the present and the future. The experience of sport in nostalgia is at the same time similar to the childhood experience, which helps to legitimize the nostalgia of a whole generation.

Besides the concept of nostalgia related to the Soviet period, it is important to observe people's everyday experience. Sport makes it easier to create one's own life story that, so to say, legitimizes a person's Soviet experience and puts it in a normal form for today's nationally disposed Estonian. Here the expression 'right to happiness' by the researcher of Estonian everyday culture Kirsti Jõesalu can be used, which emphasizes a shift of one's attention from social processes to one's own everyday life.¹² Ene Kõresaar, researcher of life stories, has, for example, brought out the contradiction in the life stories in portraying the Soviet period: although the Soviet time is considered (especially from the level of the system) as negative, the Soviet everyday life is shown rather in positive light.¹³ Top sport in this part is a peculiar compromise. On the other hand, we must consider athletes' different constructions of the narratives of life stories. Kõresaar distinguishes 'rupture' in the life stories of older Estonians. This means that in the background of the tragic events of World War II, a very clear difference in the linear narrative is made with the next fifty years (this is connected with cultural shock). However, for athletes, the

¹⁰ Kristi Grünberg, 'Andrus Kivirähki/Taago Tubina lavastus 'Helesinine vagun' (2003) - sisevaade vene multikate põlvkonna hinge?' ['The Andrus Kivirähk's / Taago Tubin's production of the play 'Helesinine vagun' (Light Blue Wagon, 2003) – a look into the soul of the generation that grew up with Russian cartoons?'] *Eesti Rahva Muuseumi Aastaraamat*, Nr 51 (2008), 19-20.

¹¹ Ene Kõresaar, 'Nostalgia ja selle puudumine eestlaste mälu kultuuris: eluloo uurija vaatepunkt' ('Nostalgia and its absence in Estonian culture of remembrance: a gaze of a life (hi)story researcher'), *Keel ja Kirjandus*, Nr 10 (2008), 763.

¹² Kirsti Jõesalu, 'The Right to Happiness': Echoes of Soviet Ideology in Biographical Narratives, *Berliner Osteuropa Info*, Nr 23 (2005), 91-99.

¹³ Ene Kõresaar, 'Nõukogude periood elulugudes: probleeme ja tähelepanekuid' ('Soviet period in life stories: problems and notes'), in Tiit Jaago (ed) *Pärimuslik ajalugu (Oral history)* (Tartu, 2001), 130.

rupture does not exist in constructing their life stories as they have other markers for their life story's narrative.

What could the wider role of sport be in my work? Sociologist Norbert Elias, who considers modern sport a social invention, first of all sees sport as something that helps the (state) power to reduce tensions in society and direct or channel necessary aggression (political, social, cultural).¹⁴ As an ethnologist, I see sport as colonizer (in the context of the present article on the sports system of the Soviet Union) in the sense of directing the power. However, the use of sport does not always mean carrying out the colonizer's will; it may give an opposite result. For example, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has observed how cricket, brought in by English colonists, became a decolonizer in India.¹⁵ Thus sport in the Soviet Estonia after World War II was, in the official public sphere, both a colonizer (formal) and decolonizer (informal). This kind of broader cultural level could be an alternative to the approach of political history used in studies of Soviet sport so far, when it is observed how the state institutions of the Soviet Union and other Eastern block countries have used sport in the Cold War. In the science of history, the sport of the socialist countries in 1945-1990 is analyzed as part of the Cold War.¹⁶ However, observing sport as a wider influence in culture, it can also be regarded as practice, which was used in that period as an adaptation to greater social changes.

Biographies in Individual Life

Using the research of sports sociologist Eduardo Archetti, sport is a sphere that, in societies of social stratification, gives an individual the possibility to experience equality and freedom.¹⁷ In Estonia, it gave top athletes the ability to do what other Estonians could not because of political constraints. The athlete could construct his/her successful biography on an open field (that is, in sport).¹⁸ Thus sport was a pacifier both on national and individual level.

I use the concept of mature socialism's everyday life in the observation of the sports community during that time. First, mature socialism's everyday life covers the period from the 1950s-1980s, differing both from the previous high-totalitarian

¹⁴ Gertrud Pfister, 'Sport History and Theory', Kalle Voolaid (ed) *People in sport history – sport history for people. Proceedings of the ISHPES seminar Tartu Estonia 2008* (Tartu, 2011), 231-232.

¹⁵ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minnesota, 1996), 89-113.

¹⁶ For example: James Riordan, *Sport, politics and communism*, (Manchester, 1991); Robert Edelman. *Serious fun: a History of Spectator Sports in the USSR* (Oxford, 1993).

¹⁷ Eduardo Archetti, *Anthropology of Sport*, www.forskningsradet.no (19.10.2011).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

and the following transitional period. The period can be considered one of stabilization, as people focus on their private lives and the requirements of the official public sphere are fulfilled formally.¹⁹ My argument is that athletes' possibilities for good individual performances broadened an athlete's private space and the athletes' community broadened their unofficial (open) space with competition and training situations. According to researchers Elena Zdravomyslova and Viktor Voronkov, the behavioural codes in the unofficial public sphere were created for various political and economical reasons in the Soviet Union in the early 1960s. In the public-social space, both formal and informal social practices were developed. They were not separated from each other, but different, two-level behavioural rules existed. Moreover, it is important to note that the totalitarian regime never did gain full control over the individual in Soviet society, but rather, in the period of mature socialism, an individual subjected a certain part of social space to his/her private interests.²⁰ Athletes also developed official and unofficial behavioural patterns and a multi-part official space requiring double morality was formed.

Using the ideas of anthropologist Alexei Yurchak, the official and unofficial levels of the Soviet period society cannot be confronted.²¹ Sports persons used the official discourse of Soviet totalitarian sport when needed. It was a necessary background, at the same time, as according to Yurchak, they were outside 'official life' most of the time. Athletes could be the ones to adjust to the new multi-level codes of the Soviet social system very quickly, because the universal value of the athletic victory preserved a lot.

In my research, I have chosen to begin with the period of stable socialism as it is defined by the researchers of Estonian everyday life. Generally, in history writing after regaining independence, the turning point was defined by Khrushchev's rise to power. However, in athletes' stories, the change started earlier. For example, top sport enabled an athlete to improve his or her material situation and, naturally, to travel abroad. Besides several acts of repression that athletes encountered before 1950, the first trips to the West had already taken place (as members of the Soviet team), which culminated in the top competitions in Europe and the rest of the world. Similarly to the period of World War II, in the middle of the 1950s the first matches began between the Estonian SSR and its neighbouring country Finland –

¹⁹ Jõesalu, *op. cit.*, 91.

²⁰ Elena Zdravomyslova and Viktor Voronkov, "The Informal Public in Soviet Society: Double Morality at Work", *Social Research. Privacy in Post-Communist Europe* Vol., 69, N° 1 (2002) 49-70.

²¹ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was forever, until it was no more: the last Soviet generation* (Princeton University, 2006).

located behind the so-called iron curtain. These competitions beyond the border of the Soviet Union with the national team definitely had influence on strengthening the Estonians' feeling of solidarity both at the time but also in today's moments of remembering.

Such events of noticeable meaning helped better to distinguish generations and identify them and to compare them. The athletes at their peak directly after the war were influenced by their activities during World War II or before war in independent Estonia. Many male athletes were haunted by their past in the Nazi German army into which they were forcibly recruited:

Probably several Estonians would have got more easily abroad, if they had played for a Russian club, for example Putmaker was offered the possibility to play in Moscow Dynamo, but this was unacceptable to the man who had worn a German uniform in the war. Straight back meant taking behind wire fence in the endless plains of Russia (male athlete, born in 1922).²²

During the period under discussion here, athletes emerged who, compared with the (direct) after-war generation, did not have a negative reputation in the eyes of the political state authorities as they were too young. The lines of athletes constitute themselves and no person with the wrong 'form' would reach the top or would not want to reach it.

In their life stories, informants refer to the differentiation of the earlier generation. This was mainly formed by the myth of the track and field athlete called Heino Lipp. He was a world-class athlete but was not allowed to compete outside the Soviet Union. His name and case are used in many life stories constructed in the 21st century, for example: 'Now the only remaining concern was that the paperwork permitting to leave the country would actually be enough. Everyone knew what happened to Heino Lipp's trips...' (male athlete, born in 1935).²³

In the second half of the 1950s, such drastic cases no longer occurred, but Lipp's story continued to be told as a warning. This is certainly one example of how a certain kind of collective memory is formed. Moreover, his story is amplified by historians, who in the official discourse characterize one man's tragic story as symbolizing the fate of the entire nation during fifty years of Soviet power.

²² Lään, *op. cit.*, 62.

²³ Vilt, *op. cit.*, 32.

Totalitarian Sport and the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic

In analyzing life stories, it is also important to define the concept of 'totalitarian sport' in the example of the Estonian SSR, that is, how can the role of sport in Soviet society be seen on the macro level?

Table 2

Totalitarian sport in the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (Atko-Meeme Viru 1999) ²⁴	
Negative	Positive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Political patriotism with the slogan 'victory at any cost' •Unethical and forced training •Use of various pharmacological means •Limited possibilities in the international arena •Silence on the ideal of Olympism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Large human and financial resources •System of sports schools •State system of selecting sports talents •Integrated system of sports organizations •Implantation of scientific nature into sport

In Table 2, Atko-Meeme Viru, an Estonian sports researcher, presents one possible approach to how to characterize the features of totalitarian sport, classifying them into negative and positive categories. In this list, there are also several features that indicate why is not entirely possible to lump all generations of athletes in the Soviet period into one case (for example, doping was not a problem in this period). From the West, researcher James Riordan has studied the Soviet totalitarian system. In his article, 'The Impact of Communism on Sport',²⁵ he brings out six partially overlapping subjects, which were the main aims of Soviet sports policy: nation-building, integration, defence, health and hygiene, social policies, and foreign policy. As it can be seen, both researchers, Viru and Riordan, proceed from the perspective of sport's role as a public and social factor. From the position of cultural studies, we can also study sports history from the position of the individual.

²⁴ Atko-Meeme Viru, 'Sport, teadus ja vaimsus 1945-1991' (Sports, science and mind 1945-1991), Arnold Vaiksaar (ed.) *Eesti Spordiajaloo Seltsi II teadusliku konverentsi 'Sport Eestis 1940-1991' materjalid* (The Estonian Society for Sports, Proceedings of the Second Scientific Conference 'Sports in Estonia from 1940 until 1991') (Tartu, 1999), 73-77.

²⁵ James Riordan, 'The Impact of Communism', in James Riordan and Arnd Krüger (eds.) *The International politics of Sport in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1999), 48-66.

One's Life Story Told in Multiple Voices

I would like to build up a more detailed study on three ideologies or voices that exist in the informants' narratives, which are interrelated and influence each other.

1. The first is the so-called 'Olympism' or 'Individual' ideology (the classical Olympic ideal adjusted to current Estonian thought), that emphasizes the individual's role and possibilities in sport. Here, the characteristic features are idealism and indifference to politics. The concept sounds rather naïve, but directly follows one of the leading principles of the Olympic Charter. According to it, individual athletes, not countries, compete in sport. While this idea was pointed out as being useful during the Soviet era, Estonian athletes today stress their will to compete for the Estonian state.

2. 'The Soviet' ideology characterised by a totalitarian sports system and support for the Soviet power; according to the aims highlighted by Riordan above. In the context of the Estonian SSR, it meant the integration of Estonians into Soviet Russian culture and also the use of sport by the Soviet Union to gain foreign political influence, defence policy, etc.

3. 'The national' ideology relies on current national history writing that emphasizes the fact of Soviet occupation in Estonia and tacit resistance to the Soviet system. Moreover, the ethnic picture and local ethnic relations in Estonia were drastically changed by mass immigration from Russians and from other peoples in the Soviet Union. Here we can see how influential remembering the past is; we understand how this nationalism appeared through how the athletes' individual stories should be told to the public.

The main point that should be stressed is that by using the ideologies related to individual and national sport, one's own activities in the Soviet sports system became legitimized. When further analysing the relationship of these three ideologies with the official sphere, we can certainly consider Soviet ideology in sport as 'official' during the Soviet period, but the individual and the national cover both official and unofficial spheres. Individual goals in sport were at an unofficial level in the Soviet period, but have today become official. On the other hand, the national level was unofficial in the Soviet period, but has definitely become the official level in present-day Estonian sports discourse.

I would also like to distinguish three types of events in an athlete's life story that mark the narrative: so-called events of historical importance, important events in sport, and changes in personal life. Naturally, from the position of remembering,

sport is in the central place. For informants, this was the aspect that changed their later life the most.

Table 3 Narrative Markers in an Athlete's Life

History	Sport	Personal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •The deportation of 1949 (about 20,000 Estonians were deported) •1953, the death of Stalin •1956, Khrushchev comes to power •1961 the monetary reform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Olympic Games in 1952, 1956, 1960, 1964 •European Championships in 1954, 1958, 1962 •The Spartakiads of the Soviet Nations in 1956, 1959, 1963 •Matches with Finland •Matches with various other socialist and capitalist countries •Soviet Championships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education • Military service • Family life (child's birth, marriage) • Employment (sports club)

Besides the Olympic Games, among the bigger competitions, the *Spartakiads* of the Soviet Nations were (re)started in this period.²⁶ In this competition, the dual confrontation of Soviet society between national and state levels clearly appeared. For the purpose of propaganda, the *spartakiads* had to bring about unity between the various nations of the Soviet Union and be the preparatory competitions for the Olympic Games, being important from the position of foreign policy, as well. As a counterbalance, the *spartakiads* participation with national Estonian teams forwarded the ethnic and national unity of the Estonian SSR. From Estonians' life stories, we can see how participating with the team of the Estonian SSR in the *Spartakiads* of the Soviet Nations (in just that period) shows a clear similarity between the past and the present, i.e., Estonia with its own independent Olympic team before World War II and after regaining independence.

²⁶ The *Spartakiads* was a sports competition that had been organized as an international working class event in the Soviet Union since the 1920s, when the Soviet system had cut itself off from the international sports movement. At that moment, the *Spartakiads* had to balance out the Olympic Games, which were considered the capitalist ones according to Soviet doctrine of the time. After 1952, when the Soviet Union joined the Olympic movement, the *Spartakiads* became the great competitions inside the Soviet Union, built on the pyramid of the Soviet sports system. (Edelman, *op. cit.*, 149)

At that time, sport was one of the most effective forms of patriotic educational work. What did one of the most effective forms of patriotic educational work mean? What did patriotic educational work mean at that time, was it the loving of ‘the great homeland’? No, our small beloved homeland has always been inside us, no one has been able to take it from us, even the usurpers ... What could for us, as athletes, at that time be more sublime than stand for the small Estonia at whatever competition of international extent, even at the *Spartakiads* of the Soviet Nations? (male athlete, born in 1934)²⁷

Getting to the more important title competitions shown in Table 3 could mean earning scholarships and a good living for a long time and, depending on athletic results, changes could take place:

In 1959, I was third at the *Spartakiade* of nations. I was selected for the Soviet team, I competed then against England. I competed against Western-Germany. Then, in 1960 I was the member of the Soviet team, competed, was at camps and at the Black Sea in spring and then just in that Malakhovka ... And then happened that the youth had to be promoted. I was 24 years old, the Soviet team’s scholarship was taken away from me as I was too old already. Can you imagine? These were all the damned Moscow rattlebrains. And then in September 1962 I went to work at university, in track and field department. (male athlete, born in 1937)²⁸

From this account, we can see the difference from people of other professions, where the turning points are deportations, Stalin’s death or Khrushchev’s rise to power or other historical social events, although these events may not directly influence the individual.

From the following examples (from the years 1998, 2002, 2004, 2007, 2008), I observe how athletes in their narratives explain the contradiction between their personal experience and, proceeding from that, the current, ‘unfair’ national discourse:

I had already been noticed in the Dynamo. The Dynamo was, after all, boarder guard, militia, interior defence forces. I was appointed to those forces. We had no connection with the KGB, I was not in the party. I have even not been a pioneer, yet somebody started the silly rumour that the members of the Dynamo were just those.

²⁷ Kuldkepp, *op. cit.*, 27-28.

²⁸ ESM 2469:6, 35.

...

I do not say anything bad about the Dynamo. The Dynamo's possibilities were much greater than the Kalev had. After all, the Dynamo tried to get coupons and later paid us 1100 roubles a month. And sent to the all-Union camp and then came those luncheon vouchers and releases from the army and everything else (male athlete, born in 1933).²⁹

The Club was the first defender of athletes and individuals in the sports system of the Estonian SSR. Today, top athletes do not derive their privileged situation in society from numerous trips abroad (as we might judge today). Rather, through this system came other material wealth, for example, sports scholarships, luncheon vouchers, cars, and flats.

On the other hand, an athlete in his life story wants to show the aims connected with Soviet ideology as formal (for example, the Dynamo as a fortifier of the defence policy of the Soviet Union), but at the same time 'ordinary people' used them in their everyday practices as informal means for adjusting to everyday life.

Proceeding from this example: in Soviet society, when publicity from an experiential position is divided into official and unofficial spheres, the acting practice of the Soviet athletes confirms it. A successful athlete acted well for Soviet ideology in the official part (for example, proved the superiority of socialism). At the same time, however, he/she increased his/her private freedom of activity and possibilities in informal sphere. The informant athlete explains once more his belonging to the state structure, which he used for individual athletic purposes only:

We were included in the staff of militia or the ministry of internal affairs, we did even not know where we were, but the money was sent there to the border guard headquarters. We then went to get it as soldiers. We could not go there in civilian clothes. We were at the training camp, dismissed from army by the Dynamo. We lived in several places, some at home, some at the Dynamo dorm. But on payday we had to go there. Vallmann's parents lived there nearby and we had soldier's combat boots, greatcoat and boarder guard's cap there. We put them on and travelled by tram, went there and lined up in queue. In the queue all were colonels and first lieutenants and we were common soldiers there. They said that they had never seen such thing in their life – they had served in the Soviet Army for 25 years already – that a soldier received salary. We got even more money than several officers (male athlete, born in 1933).³⁰

²⁹ ESM 3064:4, 25,29.

³⁰ ESM 3064:4, p 21.

Such acting practice definitely refers to the concept of double standards, which means that it was possible to act successfully in the public sphere by using both formal and informal permitted practices. Following Yurchak (2005), in the name of individual welfare and success, top athletes used both practices and this did not contradict the dominant social norms.

The next section tells about an Estonian athlete who tried to preserve her own ‘me’ while competing for the team of the Soviet Union:

As the Soviet men competed earlier and the men lost, all women were called to the large palm room for the evening. Then it was made clear ‘Women – you must win’. Oh, how all women shouted in chorus: ‘We must win’, ‘We will win’ and ‘We win’. I, of course, could not shout out such patriotism, but naturally I did my best and women won indeed (female athlete, born in 1936).³¹

In this example it is important how the athlete herself changes her own athletic achievements, to which national discourse tries to add political nuance, into individual performance. Such dialogues between different ideologies characterize all the life stories studied.

The same athlete thought, before winning the European champion’s title in the women’s relay team of the Soviet Union:

In sport the role of this gang is so important... We sat down before setting out. And frankly, I don’t know what they were thinking. But for the first time in my life I felt that we had done so much work together with those girls [the other team-mates were not Estonians] and I really can’t think about something else that I thought, I had to give my best and for the first time I felt a patriotic feeling, patriotic on Russia’s side (female athlete, born in 1936).³²

I would say that the cultural and political influence of sport as analysed by Elias or Appadurai comes clearly out on the level of an individual. Through individual realization, in spite of itself, concur the influences of social-cultural identity. ‘Russian patriotism’, i.e., the Soviet ideology in this text is again supported by the athlete’s individual practice, in this case ‘doing the work.’

In athletes’ memories, the Cold War lines of force were clear, as memories about the year 1958 show:

³¹ Linda Kepp-Ojastu (02.09.1998).

³² *Ibid.*

In Germany, which is in West Germany, we were also for the first time, the first delegation [the first track and field delegation of the Soviet Union]. We were welcomed so wonderfully, they were afraid of provocations. Mounted police was in front of us and rooflights on cars, so they were very much afraid (female athlete, born in 1936).³³

Such recalling Cold War lines of force in memories can be considered as an example of the role of ‘the witnesses of history.’ Similar details are also brought out indirectly, as in communicating with the rivals of the foreign country who considered Estonians as Russians: ‘I kept myself behind Germans, they seemed to run easily. It was difficult for me, but they possibly swore that damned Russian, he would not drop behind’(male athlete, born in 1935).³⁴ Another example of indirect details are found in memories about trips abroad, which did not take place due to the political situation:

I could improve my result the same year at the match with Americans. The meeting had to take place in Los Angeles. However, slightly before it Americans were said to have bombed a Russian ship in the Vietnamese waters, the team was gathered in Moscow and so we there unanimously protested: no, we will not compete with them (male athlete, born in 1935)!³⁵

In general, the athletes only mentioned political circumstances, while their private life stories were foremost in their remembrances. These political details were brought out as ‘compulsory’ and these events were discussed from the viewpoint of how they could change their actions to be in accordance with the social changes.

One can also adjust his or her life story to the current national discourse with the achievements from the Soviet past which justify ‘going along’ with the Soviet regime:

I did not even bother to consider that offer. I always left home with heavy heart; I did not become the patriot of the great ‘homeland.’ However, I mostly refused the invitations to the team. Only later I have thought, what the world champion’s title

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Vilt, *op. cit.*, 32.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 45.

could have meant in my future life – now, perhaps, I would not refuse (female athlete, born in 1928).³⁶

In her text, the athlete makes it clear that the ending of her sports career was caused by the wish to oppose the policy of the Soviet Union at that moment. At the same time, a dialogue takes place in the narrative of memory, where she sees that self-realization could have taken place through sports results. Hypothetically, it is possible that directly after regaining independence such discussion would hardly have taken place. However, an individual ideology and interpretation of history has become to dominate in memoirs and life stories fifteen years later.

Conclusion

By using the methods of cultural research of Soviet everyday life in my analysis of sports history, I have tried to show a clear difference between the Estonian academic sports history writing and individual's everyday experience. The first gives a clear message, according to which Soviet sport is a part of the totalitarian state system. The national discourse softens the image, while also seeing elements of resistance to the existing system in Estonian SSR sport. At the same time, the experience of an individual and his/her community turned sports practices into part of everyday life. For a top athlete, sport was an ideal and a quick way to adapt to Soviet society. In the life stories of the Soviet Estonian athletes, we can detect a tendency to seek a compromise between personal ambitions and state and national ideology. According to this, we may also draw conclusions about currently prevailing discourses.

The study of Estonian sports history has so far assumed one historical truth. By using the biographical method, through the help of athletes' life stories, we can achieve a deeper understanding of the social processes of different times. In addition, other subjects in history such as identity or memory also emerge through the stories. In the case of life stories, it is the information included in the narrative, and not its 'historical truthfulness,' that comes to the foreground.

³⁶ Valeri Maksimov, *Võrkpalli lugemik: Eesti võrkpall 1919-2008 (A Reader in Volleyball: Estonian Volleyball from 1919 until 2008)* (Tallinn, 2009), 332.