

*Christine Jencken's Großmutter's Erzählung
(Grandmother's Story) and the Aspect of Power
in Baltic-German Autobiographical Writing*¹

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Abstract. This paper aims to offer a postcolonial reading of an unpublished autobiography *Großmutter's Erzählung* (*Grandmother's Story*, 1869) by Christine Jencken. The author was born into a family of Baltic-German old nobility. The text is rather unusual because of the critical comments on the Baltic-German way of life. It can be stated that Baltic-German life-writing is in its majority forms in many aspects a monolithic body of collective memory which supported the Baltic-German hegemonic identity. It is therefore difficult to find texts which do not follow the usual line of argument which includes the “historical right” of Baltic-Germans to the land and the praise of the traditional family values. However, in every society there are people who do not agree with certain traditions or models of behaviour but they are hardly represented in Baltic-German autobiographical writing. In my search for alternative voices I have found Christine Jencken's unpublished autobiography, which offers a different insight into the Baltic-German everyday life compared to what we are used to in the autobiographies and literary texts written by the Baltic-Germans from that period.

Keywords: Baltic-German literature, postcolonialism, life-writing

This paper aims to offer a postcolonial reading of an unpublished autobiography *Großmutter's Erzählung* (*Grandmother's Story*, 1869) by Christine Jencken. The author was born into a family of Baltic-German old nobility. The text is rather unusual because of the critical comments on the Baltic-German way of life. It can be stated that Baltic-German life-writing is in many aspects a monolithic body of collective memory which supported the Baltic-German hegemonic identity. It is therefore difficult to find texts which do not follow the usual line of argument which includes the “historical right” of Baltic-Germans to the land and the praise of the traditional family values. However, in every society there

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are people who do not agree with certain traditions or models of behaviour but they are hardly represented in Baltic-German autobiographical writing. In my search for alternative voices I have found Christine Jencken's unpublished autobiography, which offers a different insight into the Baltic-German everyday life when compared to what we are used to when reading the autobiographies and literary texts written by the Baltic-Germans from that period.

This article focuses on the textual descriptions of relationships between the Baltic-German nobility and their Estonian servants and serfs as well as of relationships between men and women within traditional Baltic-German society. The acknowledgement of belonging to a hegemonic group determines the self-conception of the author and suggests a postcolonial reading.

The main reason for implementing postcolonial lines of interpretation for cultural texts in the Baltic region is the fact that the Baltic-Germans living in the territories of present-day Estonia and Latvia were local power holders for about 700 years. There was no Baltic-German peasantry; nearly all the Germans in Estonia and Latvia had higher social status. They were either landlords in the countryside, or merchants and craftsmen in towns. Hence, their influence on the cultural history of these areas cannot be underestimated. It is also worth mentioning that in the 18th century the Baltic Germans themselves started to use the word "colony" to denote their activities in the Baltic, although the direct colonial bond between this region and the motherland had ended already in the 16th century. So it was "a colony without an empire" (Annus 2007: 70).

It is well known that the history of the Baltic States has witnessed several periods of colonial rule. Baltic scholars have examined two periods from the postcolonial perspective. Firstly, scholars in Estonia have used the theoretical framework of postcolonialism for the study of Estonian literature in the late 19th and in the 20th centuries. (e.g. Kirss 2006, 2008, 2013; Peiker 2006; Hennoste 2006). Secondly, the research of Ulrike Plath (2008, 2011) has concentrated on Baltic German issues. She has studied the reflections of German colonial discourse in the writings of the Baltic Germans between 1770 and 1870. The selected period may have been influenced by an inspiring research by Susanne Zantop (Zantop 1997). Although she does not discuss the Baltic area in her *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770–1870*, the general self-perception of the Germans as being "'different" (= better) colonists" (Zantop 1997: 7) can be sensed very clearly in Baltic cultural history as well. The Germans suffered from the feeling of inferiority because of their inability to have a say in the colonial division of the world. So they resorted to the Baltic area, announcing that the Germans had had colonies much earlier than other European nations. In the rhetoric of the progressive Baltic Germans, the situation of the peasants opened up new possibilities. The

“last natives of Europe” and “the first German colony” (Plath 2011) became the tools for confirming the self-perception of the Baltic Germans as good patriarchal colonists.

The position of a Baltic German woman in this colonial context is harder to grasp than that of a Baltic German man. If the Baltic German man traditionally embodies the sexual, political and economic lines of authority, whose interaction establishes him as a hegemonic institution, the status of the Baltic German woman is more multi-layered, more ambivalent. Enjoying a hegemonic position on the one hand, she represented *otherness* on the other hand, being a woman and being subordinated to the social norms created and dominated by men. In the following analysis I will be trying to explore how the ambivalent nature of the surroundings that shaped the self-concept and the group identity of the author is manifested in her text.

Amalie Christine Jencken (1785–1880), belonged to the Baltic-German nobility in the early 19th century in Estonia, which was at that time a province of Russia. She was born as a baroness Löwenstern in the manor Rasik (Raasiku). She followed the usual path for an upper-class woman – at the age of 16 she married Baron von Tiesenhausen and became a mother soon afterwards. The young baroness lived with her husband in Neuenhoff (Uuemõisa) manor which had been held by the family for 300 years. At the age of 34 she fell in love with the doctor of the family Ferdinand Johann Jencken and divorced her husband. This scandal caused her name and story to become well-known in the very traditional and conservative society of that time. She left the country and made a new start in England with her second husband.

The title of the autobiography of Christine Jencken is *Großmutter's Erzählung. Blick in die Vergangenheit (Grandmother's Story. A Look at the Past)*. Jencken wrote the text at the age of 84 in 1869 and there are several reasons for taking a closer look at that text.

First of all it is one of the few longer autobiographical writings by Baltic-German women from this period. Although the text was written in the second half of the century, the time she spent in Estonia – the time described in her text – was at the turn of the century and the first decade of the 19th century, before the abolition of serfdom in Estonia. Anja Wilhelmi's work on Baltic-German autobiographical texts *Lebenswelten von Frauen der deutschen Oberschicht im Baltikum (1800–1939). Eine Untersuchung anhand von Autobiografien* (2008) proved once again how rare the writings of women from this period are. Jencken's original version is an unpublished manuscript in the family archives. The family then produced an English translation which has been published as a books-on-demand version for the family members. There are no studies of this manuscript either by Baltic scholars or by the Baltic-Germans. Besides the fact

that the text was unpublished, the scandalous nature of her story could have made her life an unpopular object of study for Baltic-German scholars – she was the black sheep of the family.

Secondly, she lived an extraordinary life and had experience of being part of the upper class Baltic-German society as well as belonging to lower middle-class in England. The tremendous trauma of her divorce and severing all ties made her story different – not many women would change their comfortable and convenient lives and follow their hearts. The report of the actual conflict with her first husband Tiesenhausen and her family is omitted from the text (it cannot be said whether by her or by her relatives who did the transcription) and is mentioned very briefly. But the reader can follow and enjoy the development of a personality as the writer is confronted with a new environment. It is a story of a remarkable lady who never loses her sense of humour and has the strength of character to make her wishes come true.

Großmutter's Erzählung reveals a change in identity construction. Her position as an outsider, cast out from the Baltic-German society, enables her to criticize this very group of people. Her lively spirit as well as her sharp mind enabled her to see her former life in Estonia from a different angle and point out the weaknesses and problems of this society.

Jencken's text is dedicated to her three sons Edward, Ferdinand and Heinrich, but Edward – the first son of her second marriage – is mentioned twice, since the dedication ends with the words "for Edward".² Dedications to children or grandchildren are common for autobiographical writings of laymen. It legitimizes the vain and self-centred activity of writing about one's own life and offers a clear perspective on the selection, emphasis and presentation of one's experiences. Texts like Jencken's autobiography usually offer an insight into how the person has become what she or he is at the moment of writing. The authors tend to emphasize the circumstances or facts that have been instrumental in their becoming what they are but which they believe to be unknown to their descendants. In Jencken's case, her life in Estonia is the part of her story that needs more explanations because the intended readers would not be familiar with Estonian circumstances.

Großmutter's Erzählung is written mostly in the third person. The author begins in the first person, but after the introduction she switches to the third person and explains it as follows:

² Altogether Christine Jencken had given birth to 13 children, but only seven of them reached the age of an adult.

What should I tell you about this little girl? I want to write about her in the third person in order to make the narration easier for me. I will mention a number of good features about her, but will also relate some mistakes and misjudgements, which have strongly influenced my whole life. (Jencken 1869: 3³)

As we can see in the cited paragraph, the form “she” is not used continuously. Sometimes Jencken also uses the first person, mostly with possessive phrases – “my life”, “my father”, “my mother”, “my aunt” (4). When writing about different stages of life the author uses different names for herself. At the beginning she is “a little girl” (3), “Christine” (4), later on “grandmother” (215), “your old mother” (237). Jencken mentions in her text that she was considered a good story teller in her family and she was proud of it. Writing her own story in the third person and defining different roles for herself suggests similarity to other stories she used to tell. So she uses the form that was familiar to her, although in autobiographies from those days which the author might have known – for example the autobiographies of Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Elisa von der Recke or Wilhelm von Kügelgen – the first person is being used throughout. The use of the third person singular can also be interpreted as a way of creating the necessary distance in order to write about things that were difficult or as a way to show that the author at this stage of her life as an autobiographer does not stand behind every decision and activity of the heroine. All the above mentioned motives could have played a role in her writing technique.

In writing about the things which were common in those early days, sometimes the third person plural is used – “our small country” (59), “our privileges” (59). Third person plural “we” (6) is often used at the beginning referring to the children, later on “we” is used in a more extended sense for Baltic-Germans or for the family members. This is a common way for autobiographers to emphasize that they belonged to a larger community which – as the writer believes – shared the same ideas, traditions, feelings or simply used to do the same things.

As I mentioned above, Jencken combined her own personal story with the story of Baltic-German nobility in order to explain her origin. Although she did not live the life of a Baltic-German landowner later on, this was something that formed her as a person. Writing about her childhood, the author paints a coherent picture of a well functioning household, where everybody knew their position and set of duties. Although positively represented in the description of the childhood, certain facts are brought out that were difficult for the author.

³ In the following quotes only the page numbers will be used. Quotes translated from German by the author of the article.

This can be considered a common feature in amateur writings about childhood – positive or sometimes naïve feelings are usually predominant.

The author's father Hermann Ludwig Johann von Löwenstern (1748–1815) held various high political positions such as the Landmarschall (Lord Marshal) under Catherine II and Landrat in the time of Paul I in Estonia. Jencken describes him as a person with outstanding qualities as a politician and as a solid landowner with patriarchal principles.

Serfdom was in full force in my time, every landowner reigned over his manors just as a prince. It is clear that this power was often misused by the landlords. If one considers how unrestricted power can swell the passions of people into animality and tyranny, one understands that the peasants often had to suffer. But they used to take it with the kind of patience that in later life I marveled at. In the manors of my father it was different, between the masters and the servants or peasants there was a patriarchal relationship. [...] I cannot remember one ugly word from my mother to her inferiors. (10)

Baltic-German autobiographers were often confronted with the fact that their ancestors profited from serfdom, which the authors themselves actually considered an inhuman way of treating people. Jencken says “My dear parents were surrounded with wealth and comfort [...]” (18). The mismatch between the positive childhood experiences and the darker side of political and economic conditions which provided the resources for the lifestyle of the upper-class could not be ignored by the Baltic-German authors. The public opinion (and probably also the opinion of the children who were kept in mind as readers) at the moment of writing severely misjudged this social system. The common way of dealing with this discrepancy was to underline that although there were good and bad landlords, the writer's family belonged to the good ones. This enables the authors to separate their own positive story from the negative background.

It is striking that Jencken mentions that keeping their distance with the servants and sticking to the traditional roles was the precondition for an excellent relationship with them. She states that it was forbidden for the children to go to the rooms of the servants (10). In Jencken's text the landlords appear as fathers to native children. As Susanne Zantop has pointed out, this patriarchal father-child fantasy was often used in colonial literature to underline the necessity of the colonists to *guide* and *support* the indigenous people (Zantop 1997: 102). From the point of view of the colonist, the patriarchal relationship was based on caretaking on the colonist's side and on respect and even love on the side of the peasants. Sometimes stories were used to illustrate the affection of the

peasants for the noblemen. In Jencken's case there is a story that the peasants had offered to carry the coffin of her mother on their shoulders from the church to the courtyard, which was a distance of more than 25 kilometres. This story is introduced with the remark: "The following story will prove how much our mother was loved by her inferiors." (31) Although this story might have been true, reality did not usually agree with this construction of caring-loving relations between the noblemen and the peasants.

It is interesting that although the peasants were described as the *others* with whom the children had no personal contact, the author still uses the romantic idea of peasants as children of nature, not spoiled by sinful civilization. In this construction being peasant is something desirable; it is connected with fresh air, flowers and leisure: "She [Christine] often expressed the wish that she would have liked to have been born as a peasant because then she could have spent the whole day outside, picking flowers and making wreaths." (4)

In describing her life as a young woman the author adds darker colors to her positive picture of the life-style of the Baltic-Germans. The perspective of a child who does not have to worry about any financial or organizational problems changes to the perspective of a landlady, who has to manage the everyday life in the manor and subordinate herself to her husband's sometimes extravagant wishes.

It is important to keep in mind that Christine Jencken left her Baltic home as a result of a major conflict with her family. It is only natural that the circumstances of her divorce made her more critical towards the whole world-order of Baltic-German nobility. That might be one of the reasons why Jencken decides to comment unfavourably on the habits of this class, although an unwritten rule for nobility forbids speaking about one's problems openly. Although the criticism about the Baltic-German lifestyle could be interpreted as a result of bitterness, the more accurate judgment would probably be to see it as openness – a feature which is characteristic of the whole text. The fact that the writer is not blind to her own mistakes and small-mindedness also supports this interpretation.

One example of criticism is Christine's description of Baltic hospitality. This is one feature of Baltic-German culture of which the Baltic-Germans used to be very proud. In almost every Baltic-German autobiography or novel of the 20th or late 19th century, the atmosphere of cosy evenings and fabulous balls in Baltic manor houses is praised. Jencken unmasks this cherished Baltic myth from the point of view of a landlady who had to manage the practical side of hospitality:

What ruined our nobility the most – as everywhere – was that they all lived beyond their financial means. And it was no surprise that in Estonia, where the hospitality was so important, in some cases families became greatly impoverished. It was not just the relatives and friends who stayed for many weeks, one was also compelled to feed their horses, coachmen and servants. [...] I can still remember one Christmas, when we had a house more than full with guests, who stayed for 14 days. There were 40 additional horses in our stable, and all the guest's servants... Poor Christine often didn't know what to do. Then the housekeeper came complaining and wailing that all the provisions were running out and she didn't know what to cook. (57)

We witness once more the change of perspective. Jencken as a story-teller “can still remember” but she distances herself from the expression of the sorrows of her younger “me”. This technique is followed throughout the whole story.

One more taboo Jencken uncovers is the relationship between married couples. As Anja Wilhelmi points out in her above cited work, the Baltic noblewomen did not complain about their husbands. Kairit Kaur in her study about the writings of Baltic-German women at the turn of the century has also underlined the predominance of the understanding of a woman as a family-oriented wife and mother (Kaur 2013: 408). Jencken's text is different; she writes about her tears on her wedding-day (48) and about the coldness and insensitivity of her husband: “He rejected every question with coldness and resoluteness that often cost Christine tears.” (57) The reason for other female authors for remaining silent about problems with marriage and society was their wish not to disturb the status quo. They wished to preserve the society as it was, even with its problems and to make it look attractive to the children. In the case of Jencken, her divorce exempted her from the need to give a nice and coherent picture of her first marriage to her readers.

The descriptions are also meant to underline the happiness and respect in her second marriage: “My husband, who always took interest in everything I did [...]” (102). It is noteworthy that the wealthy world of Baltic-German nobility is seen as cold and superficial (with the exception of the mother), whereas the modest life of a middle-class woman in England is mostly described as fulfilling and satisfying.

Let us focus briefly on the description of the divorce. When Christine first got married, she was almost a child. The reader can follow her progress on her way to becoming more and more mature. It is peculiar to find out that after she had fallen in love with Jencken her husband and family decided to send her to a German health resort. Visiting resorts and spending sometimes months in those establishments was a part of the life-style of higher society in

those times. The resorts were not only used for physical illnesses but also for mental diseases. Unsatisfying relationships and the inability to express emotions were common reasons for psychological problems in women. As we know women in these situations became the field of interest for the famous doctor Freud some time later. In Jencken's time a visit to a resort was normally only a short interruption, after which the women returned to their normal lives which they sometimes hated. Not many women in those times had the courage to take responsibility for their own lives and make decisions that did not meet the approval of the community. For Christine the trip did not bring any solution or relief. After some time she made up her mind and divorced her husband Baron Tiesenhausen. By choosing to get divorced, the author liberated herself from the rules and regulations of the Baltic-German society. It was definitely difficult for her to leave her five children behind but this was the price for her new beginning. The issue of giving up children is not described or discussed by the author. The reader can only assume that it must have happened. First the author says that she is now free to give herself to her beloved man; then she mentions the monetary issue and it is only in this context that she refers to her children. The decision to leave Estonia involved much anxiety but actually the divorce had already cut her off from her family and friends. There was no way she could have maintained her social life in Estonia, so leaving for England was the only logical way forward.

The first and irreversible step had been her divorce during which she lost a part of her identity. Her narration is constructed as a survival story; the difficulties described do not break her. Her positive attitude results from the knowledge that eventually everything turned out fine.

Compared with other texts of Baltic-German women from the 19th century her writing is more critical and open-minded. *Großmutter's Erzählung* is a unique text because there are few autobiographical texts which describe the late 18th and the early 19th century Estonian reality. Jencken's text contributes to a broader understanding of aspects of life for noblemen in those times – maintaining the hegemonic position, visiting the health resorts, receiving visitors for longer periods, relationships between married couples. The remarks about different aspects of contact between the nobility and peasants were not central from Jencken's point of view but these parts of the text are of great interest to Estonian readers today. Jencken's enjoyable style – a mix of simplicity and irony – as well as her sensitive mind create an interesting picture of a woman's life in those times.

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