

Independent Study

A Life History of Mania Ritter

Submitted to:

Dr. Lynwood Montell
Folk Studies Department
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Submitted by:

Kim Schmitt
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During the past several years I have been in search of who I am and who I will be. In this struggle to discover myself I have taken numerous classes from varying disciplines, worked at many different jobs and spoken to countless individuals about their particular careers and interests. In my search I have discovered that although I have a great love for and interest in languages, I am not a linguist. I simply do not have the natural talent necessary for fluent communication in a foreign language. I have, however, learned that language and cultural barriers can many times be broken when one makes the effort. I have also discovered that I am neither historian nor folklorist. At least at the present I do not wear either of those labels. Although I believe these two disciplines to be complimentary, I noted during my years in the Folk Studies department that many others refuse to accept that notion. They view the two disciplines as being divided by a vast chasm. Through this independent study, as well as my current project with the Louisville Water Company, I have discovered that perhaps my future lies in the field of oral history. If it does not, I do know, however, that oral history will play an important role in whatever I decide to do.

I began this study nearly a year ago yet have allowed it to remain incomplete as I worked on other projects. Why? With the completion of this paper I will be closing yet another door in my life and I am not certain that that is what I want. I realize, however, that it is a necessity.

When I began this project, I thought it would be a breeze. I have discovered that although it has and continues to be a labor of love, it has not always been as simple as I initially thought it would be. The circumstances which proved to be to my advantage have also proven to be to my downfall. I believe that it is my relationship with Mania Ritter which afforded me the opportunity to do this study. In all honesty, I do not think she would have shared the time and memories with a stranger. At the same time, this relationship, on occasion, has hindered my progress. For instance, I was not as persistent in arranging interviews as I would have been with another informant. The concept of handling the insider/outsider dilemma, however, is not a new topic of discussion for the fieldworker. There are several books and essays which deal with the topic of the fieldworker and his informant. One of the better known of these is Women in the Field. This collection of essays, edited by Peggy Golde, provides detailed accounts of several women and their fieldwork experiences. These women experienced advantages and disadvantages because of their sex, marital status, age and race. Without a doubt the insider/outsider relationship between the fieldworker and his informants will prove to be advantageous in some cases and a hinderance in others.

The Fieldwork and Oral History Class proved to be the best preparation for this study. If I learned nothing else in that class, I learned the necessity of being prepared and being an aggressive yet sensitive interviewer. Two of the texts for that class, Ives's The Tape-Recorded Interview and Allen and Montell's

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From Memory to History, proved to be helpful in the process of performing the interviews and the interpretation of the interviews. Ives identifies two themes in his text: 1) the need for good bookkeeping techniques--keeping copies of letters, checking and rechecking equipment, maintaining a journal, making complete opening and closing announcements, numbering tapes systematically, keeping track of which picture goes with which interview, cataloguing, transcribing and so on and 2) emphasis on the common man.¹ Although not successful in completing all of his bookkeeping requirements, I did make a serious attempt to do so. Items of greatest importance to me were the proper labeling of cassettes and the checking and rechecking of the equipment before and during the interview. I used many different recorders, each with its own quirks and idiosyncrasies. During one of the interviews I had problems with the taperecorder and microphone. Had I not rechecked the equipment at the beginning of the interview, my end product would have been a blank tape. The fieldworker's nightmare!

Allen and Montell's From Memory to History proved to be extremely helpful in the interpretation of the Ritter interviews. They state that the characteristics of oral history include: disregard for standard chronology, emotional association of persons as a primary organizing principle, clustering of oral accounts around significant events or persons, reliance on visual imagery and striking detail, compression or telescoping of historical time, displacement of original actors in a historical event with others, migration of dramatic narrative elements among historical accounts and patterning of oral accounts of different events

along similar lines.² Most if not all of these characteristics are present at some point in this series of interviews. Identifying these characteristics as such helped me to organize the information, to validate and to supplement it with outside information when possible and to prepare a narrative discussing the life of Mania Ritter.

To gather information for this narrative I conducted five interviews; four with Mania Ritter and one with her husband John Ritter. The length of the interviews ranged from one hour to nearly two hours. The interviews dealt with personal reminiscences of bygone days as well as accounts of major world events. The primary topics discussed were Mania Ritter's Russian heritage, early childhood, life during World War II, immigrant experience, role as mother and wife, and career as a teacher. These aspects of her life will be examined during the course of this paper. As I began this project, I knew I would be told stories of the Morozov family, Paris under German occupation, an immigrant in New York City, life with John Ritter and the teaching profession. I had no idea of the secrets I would uncover. No, not necessarily secrets, but rather those aspects of Mania Ritter's life which generally are not discussed. As I listened to her story, my understanding^{of} and admiration for this special woman grew. This narrative is but a glimpse of a glimpse of the life of Mania Ritter.

I have spent numerous hours listening and relistening to this series of interviews. I have asked myself time and time again, what am I going to do with this information? what approach do I wish to take? I have decided to tell Mania Ritter's story

and for that reason will primarily depend upon the tape recorded interviews. I will, however, use outside sources to verify the occurrence of world events. The number of books written on the Russian Revolution, World War II, the immigrant in American society, the American Army and the teaching profession are countless.

I want this narrative to be the expression of an individual and in doing so demonstrate how her life was shaped by those around her. It would be extremely easy to write about poor little Mania, life has not been easy for her. Or about Mania the magnificent who can survive anything. Neither of those are the Mania I know. The woman I know lives for the present, neither regretting nor resenting the past. She is a survivor, but not because that is what she strives to be but rather because that is what society has forced her to be. She views herself as a common everyday person, indeed she is just that. However, at the same time, her life is something unique simply because of who she is and the life she has led.

Russian Heritage

Although she has never lived in Russia, the largest of the Soviet Republics, Mania Ritter possesses a Russian soul. Anyone who is acquainted with her knows that she is proud of her Russian heritage and holds dear the tales and traditions of Old Russia.

She speaks relatively little of her family not understanding the American desire to discover one's roots. She does, however, speak proudly of her relationship with the Morozov family. Her grandmother's grandparents were Morozovs. During three

generations of Morozovs (1812-1880), the dynasty rose from serfdom to being the leading industrialists of Russia. They were among the richest and most powerful families in the country. The Morozov's found fame and fortune not only in the realm of textiles, but railroad ventures and shares in leading private banks as well. Each generation contributed to the family's success. Perhaps the most well known of the Morozovs is Savva (the second Savva). He controlled the family business as well as supported the Arts and various social causes in Moscow. Although the Morozovs have all but vanished from Soviet society, remnants of their contributions to Russian society remain; among these are the Moscow Art Theater and the Turgenev Library.³ In The Forgotten Class, Valentine T. Bill wrote,

There is much in the history of the Morozov family which is exceptional and extraordinary: the measure of success attained, old Savva's prodigious strength and enterprise, young Savva's sympathies for the revolutionary movement and his tragic end. But there is a great more in it which is typical of the times and of the history of the Russian bourgeoisie: the peasant origin of the Morozovs; their affiliation with Old Belief; the painful efforts of the first generation to extricate themselves from the burden of servitude; the cold-blooded, uncompromising tyranny displayed by the second generation; the artistic interests and cultural achievements and contributions of the third;⁴ and the rising tide of revolution confronting them.

As the years of unrest and revolution dawned in Russia, many of the Russian bourgeoisie left their homes in search of a new place to live: Neither the blame nor the glory of the Russian Revolution can be credited to a single day, individual or event. It was the product of years of unrest caused in part by social differences. In the introduction to The Russian Revolution

and Bolshevik Victory, Arthur Adams described the revolution as an incredibly complex historic event...

Acted out on a nationwide stage it presents an almost limitless panorama of suffering humanity caught up in a series of swiftly evolving crises no one seemed able to prevent. Passions and pressures built up through many generations of frustration were concentrated in a social and political upheaval that may be likened to a long-continuing explosion which tossed men and ideas about like matchsticks, crumbling traditions and institutions to dust. It is not easy to comprehend such phenomena.

The Russian Revolution began in March of 1917 with the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II and his son Alexis. Lenin and the Bolsheviks seized power in October of 1917, however, the revolution continued as the Russian people struggled to discover who they were. For many the new socialist government was appealing, yet for many others it promised downfall.⁶ As members of the Russian bourgeoisie, Maria Liest and her daughters left their native Russia in order to preserve what they could of the family wealth.

The family fled from the Bolsheviks by means of a ship leaving the Black Sea. Mania Ritter commented,

They [her grandmother, aunt, mother and possibly her father] left Russia from somewhere in the Black Sea, from Odessa. And they got on a French boat and were going to Italy. This a whole story in itself. Well anyway, times were tough and when they got on the boat there was an epidemic of typhus. So the boat got quarantined and no food came in nor came out. Nothing came in and came out. They stayed there for forty days. And grandmother tried to throw some jewelry to people to give her food. And of course the people would get the jewelry and never come back. And as a consequence of that, my brother died of starvation. He was a tiny baby.

From Russia her family went to Italy and from there they went to England and Germany before finally settling in Paris, France.

Helen Liest and George Ivanov, Mania Ritter's parents, met when they were young. Her mother was a volunteer for the Army which was fighting the Bolsheviks and her father was an officer in the Tsarina's Army. Being very much in love, the young couple were married. After several years as man and wife, they realized that they had made a mistake in getting married and were divorced. In describing her parents, Mania commented,

I remember my father being a not too tall man. Dark hair. Everybody said he had a marvelous disposition. Sang well, played the guitar. Then would disappear, go to the hospital. I never knew what he did...My mother must have been a beautiful woman, not as much as grandmother--grandmother was really beautiful. She was tall, very tall. Had beautiful hair. Was very talented. Could do anything with her hands. And awfully impractical. She did not know how to make money.

Due to her parents' divorce and father's illness, Mania did not have the opportunity to spend much time with her father. He died when she was twelve or thirteen years old. Unfortunately, although she spent time in the presence of her mother, she and her mother never developed the mother-daughter relationship that many women share.

On January 11, 1922, Mania Ivanov was born in Wiesbaden, Germany. She was the only surviving child of George and Helen Ivanov. After living in Wiesbaden for two or three years, the family moved to Paris and began a business. There was little time for a young girl. Her grandmother as well as her aunt were busy starting a new business. Her mother simply did not wish

to be bothered with a small child. So at the tender age of three, young Mania was placed on a train and sent to a boarding school in the south of France.

Schoolgirl Years

Between the ages of three and eighteen, Mania spent relatively little time with her family. She spent the school year in boarding school and summers at camp. Although many individuals would be resentful of such treatment, Mania considered it as a way of life and was accepting of her situation. Her childhood was not an especially happy one. She felt rejected as she was sent to school and the family remained in Paris. At an age when many children are showered with love from their parents and other family members, Mania had to look elsewhere for affection. During her school years she made many very special friends who served as her family. She said, "I did not have a childhood of family but I had friends."⁹

During her school years, Mania attended four different boarding schools. Although she now has very distinct memories of the people, places and events as they relate to school, she has some difficulty remembering how old she was while attending a particular school. The first boarding school she attended was in the southwestern portion of France; the second was just outside of Paris; the third in the southeastern portion of France near the Riviera in Carne and the last boarding school was in Paris.

Mania Ritter spoke little about the first school she attended except to say that she was alone and unhappy there. A concept

not so difficult to fathom when you consider her age and feelings of rejection. The second school, a Catholic school just outside of Paris, proved to be a much better school. Although not from a religious family, she found peace at this school. At a time when she needed affection and approval from adults, Mania received it not from her family but rather from the Nuns at the school.

When she was about eleven years old, her grandmother decided that she needed to learn about her Russian heritage as well as to speak the Russian language. For that reason, she, the little French girl (which was not considered to be an honor at the boarding school), was sent to a Russian school in Carne. This particular boarding school was maintained as if everyone present were living in Tsarist Russia and not a town in the south of France. It appears as if many Russians felt that they would one day return to the Russia of yesteryear and needed to be prepared. The boarding school was co-ed, however, the boys and girls attended different classes. Students attended regular school on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday; however, Thursday was dedicated in its entirety to the study of Russian. Since Mania was never formally introduced to the Russian language she had difficulty at first. It was not long though before she was able to speak, read, write and comprehend the language. Mania's fondest recollections of her school years are memories of time spent in Carne. It was in Carne that she began to discover who she was as well as to develop a love for the church and boys.

The last boarding school she attended was in Paris. It was a girls school which catered to Russian students as well

ones of other nationalities. The school was run by the Count and Princess. The girls lived in a house yet attended classes at the French public schools. Studies included French grammar and composition, math, history, geography, science, drawing, singing and sewing. As a student at this school, Mania became interested in sports and played on the school basketball team. Although she enjoyed the sport itself, it also served as an outlet for years of frustration. She commented,

As I said, I did not have a normal childhood. It was not a happy childhood, as I say I do not want to cry and blame whatever I am on my childhood. But I think that sports gave me an outlet. Finally I was doing something well on my own as well as anybody else. It was pleasant and I liked it and it made me feel really good.¹⁰

Just before Mania was to take her exams to graduate, France declared war on Germany and the French public schools were closed. In order to complete her exams and to graduate, she spent some time at a Catholic school in Paris. As the nations of Europe declared war on Hitler's Germany, Mania Ritter was beginning a new segment of her life.

World War II

Not long after France declared war on Germany, Hitler's troops marched into Paris and German occupation began. The French, still recovering in part from the last world war, had no desire to fight the Germans. Although they did not welcome the Germans they preferred their presence to the use of France as a battleground. On June 14, 1940, the Germans marched into Paris. Mania Ritter witnessed their entrance,

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They entered the city all of a sudden...I don't know why I was there and I don't remember if I went on purpose there. But they marched on the Champs Elysees and went past the Arch of Triumph. And I saw that. I saw there were very few French people watching that, but some people. And it was very unpleasant because you knew it was people who were occupying you. I didn't connect too well. What really hurt me was to see the swastika on the Eiffel Tower. That did to me more, you know they always have the French flag, then all of a sudden there was a swastika. I really don't know why I did not feel too bad.

Although the years of the Second World War and German occupation were years of strife for most; Mania Ritter was happy. Yes, life was simple and although there were struggles, she was happy. She commented,

Was I happier? Well, yes, in a way. I was not in boarding school. I had the freedom I always dreamt about in my life. I had a job, it was a very modest little job, and it made me feel good. I was in Paris, where I always loved Paris. Yeah, I felt good.

She lived with her family in the city and on occasion in the country. During the war survival was of the utmost importance. At the time of the war, Mania was young, energetic and adventurous, this worked to her advantage.

Upon completion of school, Mania began her search for a job. Although not a German in the true sense of the word, Mania was considered to be one simply because she had been born in Germany. Over the years she experienced difficulties from the French authorities because of being a foreigner, however, discrimination became increasingly more prevalent during the 1940s. It was because of her nationality that she was refused for many jobs. She did, however, have several jobs during the war years.

Her first job consisted of filing papers for a company. The company dealt with equipment that transported meat within a slaughter house. While working for this company, Mania improved her clerical skills by learning to type, to write in shorthand and to speak English more fluently. Soon she gained enough of the essential skills to find a better job.

Next she worked in the main office of an agency which cared for handicapped individuals, including many paraplegics. Although she did not make a lot of money working at this agency, she enjoyed being there because she was helping other people. Upon the recommendation of her supervisor, Mania left her position and moved to another job. Her supervisor felt the move necessary because she was becoming too attached to the patients. In fact she almost married one of the paraplegics even though now she is thankful she didn't.

Her third job was performing clerical duties for a man who sold fruit. This was perhaps the easiest of her jobs, for her employer was rarely around and allowed her to basically do as she pleased. Later she discovered that he dealt on the black market. Mania was working for him when Paris was liberated.

Although she was a diligent worker, Mania did spend time doing other things. One of her favorite leisure time activities was spending time with her friends, especially her boyfriend. This boyfriend was a Polish spy working as part of the Resistance against the Nazis. Although Mania was not part of the Resistance, she did help the spy by delivering messages, carrying the code book and informing the group of any arrests. She was young, naive, very much in love and willing to do anything for her Polish

spy. It was not until many years later, after she had helped him escape from France, that she realized just how much he had used her. After his escape, she spent years waiting to hear from ^{him} her, however, he never contacted her again.

In addition to helping a spy, Mania Ritter did many other illegal things in order to survive. She was forced to deal on the black market because as a foreigner she was not issued rations for items such as clothes and shoes. She ran errands out to the countryside in order to purchase illegal produce and dairy products from the black market farmers. She missed curfew and even crossed from an occupied zone to a non-occupied zone without permission. Although she told me many stories about her war time experiences, I found this story to be one of the most interesting,

The Germans would not give me a permit. You had to have a permit to go from the occupied zone to the non-occupied, but there were ways of doing it. And so you would have to give money. I don't know how I found about those ways. But anyway, you went to a little city and you asked for a man. And they you had to give him money. They he put in a room and then in the middle of the night he would come and they would wake you up. And take you. The sad part is that I was just going to see my mother, but there were Jews who were escaping from the Nazis. If or maybe they did get caught, I never knew what happened. So he told you when you were going to go there. And you are going to cross that field. At the end of that field there's a boat. A man is waiting for you and he'll take you across. That's when, crossing that field, I heard those dogs. And ran and did catch the boat. I don't know how many people were supposed to catch that boat. You heard a lot of voices, a lot of commotion. I have never seen such a dark night in my life. Everything was in the dark...The field was recently plowed and it was really hard to run. And anyway, I made it to the boat and so did six

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other people. But you heard the Germans and you heard the dogs. I have a feeling somebody was caught, but nobody talked. Nobody talked to each other...¹³

Needless to say, life was not easy during the war and people constantly had to take chances in order to ensure their survival.

After four years of German occupation, Paris and the French people were liberated. The Liberation of Paris occurred on October 25, 1944. Every bell in Paris rang in celebration. Mania Ritter described the event,

So we heard the bells ring and everybody went out into the streets. And I knew everybody was happy. I knew it was the end of the war. But I don't know if I realized what was going on, that it was the end of a big war. And you know, it was nice. It made you feel good...It was nice to feel that it was the end. It was beautiful to hear all the bells. This happens once in a lifetime, when all the bells of all the churches, I don't know how they had all of that synchronized, but they did. And then the Nazi flag was taken off the Eiffel Tower. Then the next day you walked in and there was nothing but Americans all over Paris. And so I went to the Champs Elysees. My friends and I decided to be part of that historic moment and we went to the Champs Elysees and we saw a lot, a lot, a lot of people. And deGaulle going down the Champs Elysees to Notre Dame, which is a heck of a walk. But anyways he did that and they started shooting at the crowd. There were some, what do you call it? Snipers...I don't know who was shooting, but all of a sudden, the whole crowd laid down, thousands of people.¹⁴

With the liberation of Paris and the entrance of American troops into the city, Mania sought a job with the American Armed Forces. She received a position with the American Graves Registration Command. While in this office she met John Ritter. Some time later, John proposed to Mania. Not wanting to be a war bride, she declined his offer of marriage and set out for America.

The Immigrant Experience

Although Mania had never given much thought to living in the United States, it was her aunt's dream. In 1948, her aunt moved to the Unites States. U