Food Memories

Connecting to Rural Roots through Food in Life Writings by Finnish Women Born in the 1950s

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During the Covid-19 pandemic, Finland witnessed an unexpected interest in the countryside; social media were filled with pictures of idyllic countryside landscapes, summer cottages, and berry picking. The significant increase in distance working brought new opportunities to rural areas. For the first time in decades, internal migration to the capital city of Helsinki slowed, and migration to more sparsely populated parts of Finland increased (Lehtonen & Kotavaara 2021:48, 55). This renewed interest in the countryside reminded the society of the short history of urbanization in Finland. Large-scale migration from countryside to cities occurred particularly from the late 1960s, so Finland became urbanized relatively late in comparison to other European countries. It was not until the early 1970s that the urban population exceeded the rural population (Haapala 2004:235; Sarantola-Weiss 2008:9). Even today, Finland is one of the most rural of the OECD countries (Copus (ed.) 2011; OECD 2008). The countryside continues to be important for many urban dwellers as a second-home residence or holiday destination, and because they have family roots in the countryside. Many people have experienced living in the countryside (Hämeenaho 2018:170).[1]

In this article, we analyse autobiographical writings depicting rural life in Finland, collected during the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–2021). The writings were collected in collaboration with the Finnish Museum of Agriculture Sarka and the Finnish Literature Society Archives through a nationwide thematic campaign entitled "My Countryside". The aim of the call was to encourage participants of different ages to recollect and tell their personal memories of Finnish countryside, and to ponder on what the countryside meant for them in the present day. In this article we focus on women who were born in the 1950s and witnessed the drastic transition from agricultural to industrialized society during their youth and young adulthood.

Although the call did not especially suggest food as a topic of writing, food nevertheless emerged as a central theme in the life writings submitted in response to the call. Particularly older participants included vivid childhood memories of dishes and food production, as well as stories about how they had carried practices and habits from their childhood to the present day. In other words, food production was strongly associated with the rural way of life in their narratives. In this article we seek to trace the different meanings that food is given in these life narratives. How are relationships to the countryside constructed through food?

Theoretical Framework and State of the Art

In terms of theory, this article represents ethnographic research informed by interdisciplinary studies of life writing and oral history (e.g. Smith & Watson 1998; Chansky 2016) and draws on the concept of belonging (e.g. May 2017; Harris et al. 2021; Habib & Ward 2020). In the following, we first present the theoretical background, data, and methods of the study, followed by the analysis of the food-related narratives by female authors. We argue that, in the life narratives of Finnish women born in the 1950s, food – here understood as referring to both memories and everyday practices related to food and food production – offers an important way of

connecting to their rural roots, and to the rural way of living.

The article combines two strands of research: ethnographic research on food, and interdisciplinary theories of belonging, in order to explore the meanings given for food-related narratives in the life writings depicting rural life in Finland.

Traditional food and cooking have long been part of ethnological research. Food and eating are not just individual choices, but many everyday practices and routines are based on collective patterns rather than on individual habits (Ehn & Löfgren 2010:120). In society, values and attitudes change over time, and people often adopt and adapt new ideas and habits. Accordingly, the relationship to food is a reflection of the transformation of society. Eating and cooking practices have changed over time, as pointed out in food-history studies (e.g. Kylli 2021:365–366, 416). Everyday meals are influenced by a range of contextual factors. For example, the impact of parents, family traditions, and life history is evident in our food-related practices (Haulund Otto 2016:88, see also Short 2006; Ehn, Löfgren & Wilk 2015).

Recent studies have increasingly focused attention on food and eating habits, on gendered practices related to food, on spatial and new-materialist approaches, as well as on experiences, emotions, and memories related to food (e.g. Holtzman 2006; Knuuttila 2006; Lindqvist 2009; Bardone & Kannike 2017; Jönsson 2019). David Sutton, an anthropologist specializing in the study of food and memory, points out how cooking is not just about food, but much more about social, material, and symbolic issues in the surrounding society (Sutton 2016:366). Matilda Marshall and Jón Þór Pétursson (2022) have further analysed connections between food, personal memory, and emotions. By exploring embodied memories related to past food storage, they illustrate how longing for "old-fashioned" cellars and well-equipped pantries often reflects a nostalgic perception of an idealized past. Hence, it is not the history as it once was, but rather reinterpretation of past emotional experiences in the present that plays out in this nostalgic longing.

In this article we pay attention particularly to the role of food in mediating memories and creating a sense of belonging. Following the influential work of Nira Yuval-Davis (e.g. 2006; 2011), the concept of belonging has been used across disciplinary boundaries during the last decade. It has been applied to address the "fluid, unfixed, and processual nature" of diverse social and spatial attachments – in particular when doing research with people perceived as vulnerable or disadvantaged, such as ethnic minorities or young people (for the history of the concept, see Lähdesmäki et al. 2016:234; Harris et al. 2021:45–69).

Our analysis builds on the growing literature about belonging as a theoretical concept for multidisciplinary youth studies (e.g. Harris et al. 2021; Curvo & Wyn 2017; Habib & Ward 2019), and life writing/autobiographical research (e.g. May 2017). We understand belonging as a concept referring to a sense of connection, membership, attachment, and security, infused with individual and collective histories and shaped by mundane everyday practices that people experience daily (Habib & Ward 2019). As Floya Anthias has put it, "to belong is to be accepted as part of a community, to feel safe within it and to

have a stake in the future of such a community" (2006:21). However, this sense of belonging is not something fixed, but rather a result of continuous re-creation: repeated everyday practices build the layers of an affective experience of place and community over time (Wyn & Cuervo 2017).

Finally, we wish to underline that belonging is also constructed by history: connectedness to the local history, culture, and traditions, which is vividly present in the life narratives discussed in this article. Vanessa May (2017) has used the inspiring concept of "belonging from afar" in the context of life writings by elderly citizens, to underline that belonging may not always be anchored in the present time. May analysed life writings by elderly participants in the British *Mass Observation Project*,[2] pointing out that many of them expressed profound temporal displacement in present-day society, but felt strongly connected to past memories that still provided a sense of comfort and belonging for them. Indeed, the notion of temporalities is very relevant in the analysis of life writings by the Finnish women born in the 1950s. In their narratives, they discuss belonging both in the temporal context of their childhood and youth, and in the temporal context of the time of writing, as will be discussed in the following.

Thematic Life Writings as Research Material

This article is based on life writings collected in collaboration with the Finnish Museum of Agriculture Sarka and the Finnish Literature Society Archives through a thematic writing campaign entitled "My Countryside". The collection of written memory-based research materials on the past builds on longstanding traditions of ethnographic surveys and oral history traditions. The Finnish Literature Society (SKS) has collected written ethnographic descriptions, surveys, personal memories, and testimonies since the early twentieth century (Kivilaakso, Pesonen & Taavetti 2022:96–99).

The Finnish tradition is often defined as part of the Nordic-Baltic oral history tradition, which is characterized by a strong emphasis on academic theorization and written sources, as well as application of oral history approaches to written sources (Heimo 2016:40–41). While the collection of oral histories is community driven in many countries, in Finland the collection of memory-based materials is primarily driven by archives and academic research. Thematic writing collection campaigns are widely used by researchers from different academic fields who seek to reach wide audiences. The Finnish Literature Society arranges dozens of campaigns yearly, and written reminiscences are also collected by other archives and museums (see also Savolainen & Taavetti 2022; Jouhki & Vehkalahti 2020; Laurén & Malinen 2021).

In different studies, various terms have been used to describe written memories (see Kivilaakso, Pesonen & Taavetti 2022:98–100; Savolainen 2017). In this article, we use the term *thematic life writing* in order to emphasize the literary form of the material on the one hand, and the thematic scope (rurality) on the other. Life writing is a flexible term that is used to refer to a wide range of texts and forms of writing with an autobiographical intention, not only autobiographies as such (e.g. Chansky 2016:xxi). Texts submitted to "My Countryside" vary greatly; there are short,

one-page entries, and long, comprehensive life stories that follow autobiographical conventions. Texts approaching literary genres such as poems were also submitted. The aim of the campaign was to inspire people of all ages and backgrounds to provide their memories: "How do you remember the countryside of your childhood and youth? What does countryside mean to you in the present day? Tell your own story!" (the subtitle for the call for submissions). Rather than aiming at "authentic documentation" of past life, the campaign emphasized personal perspectives, opinions, and interpretations by underlining that anyone was welcome, and all stories would be valuable. The term "stories" was deliberately used in order to lower the threshold for participation, and to allow the participants to narrate their stories as freely as possible.

The call was open at the museum website from December 2020 to December 2021. It is important to note that this partnership has probably encouraged those interested in and following rural issues to participate. Although the call was advertised in several magazines, newspapers, and social media channels, it is likely that many participants were attracted especially because they wanted to share their memories with the Museum of Agriculture. Calls can be framed in particular ways to guide the respondents, but the respondents often surprise the researchers by answering in unexpected ways (Mikkola, Olsson & Stark 2019). This is also very fruitful. Unlike in face-to-face interviews or with questionnaires, respondents can take their time to think about the call and focus on the themes that they think are important, which opens new doors to research options (see e.g. Helsti 2005:151; Leimu 2005:77; Latvala 2005:27). The call provided a range of possible themes and questions to spark writing (including questions related to childhood memories, hobbies, gender, opinions about rural development, and agricultural work). However, the writing instructions were fairly informal, deliberately giving the writers the freedom to write about things that were important and meaningful to them. Food clearly seemed to be that for the women.

In total 121 authors sent their responses (175 stories). In addition, 75 photographs were submitted and 96 people volunteered for oral history interviews. As could be predicted on the basis of similar earlier collections, the call attracted especially women (70% of all participants) and authors over 60 years of age (75% of all participants). Women born in the 1940s (28 participants) and 1950s (26 participants) were most active. Finnish life writing calls are known for their wide scope and participation, and people of all ages, sexes, and varying social backgrounds do participate. However, it has been noted that participation requires motivation and resources, such as time for writing, as well as some literary skills and interest (Makkonen 1993; Vehkalahti & Suurpää 2014). Indeed, the life writings submitted by older participants testify to their strong motivation to document past life in the countryside, including old farming practices, harsh living conditions, or ways of living that they felt were already lost and needed to be documented.

Food-related topics (especially childhood memories of food) can be found in the life writings of some male authors, too. However, since the topic was particularly prevalent in women's narratives, we focus on the writings of women born in the 1950s

(26 responses). While childhood memories from the 1940s are strongly marked by the war and reconstruction era efforts, narratives by women born in the 1950s capture a slightly different picture. The women were born during the last years of traditional agriculture, guided by the principle of self-sufficiency, and they witnessed the rapid mechanization of agriculture and other social changes in their childhood and youth. In the 1950s the countryside was still full of life, but the following two decades saw a major wave of out-migration (e.g. Niemelä 2008). In the narratives selected for this analysis, the effects of war are in the background, and the primary focus is on the 1950s–1970s; on experiences, feelings, and events of their childhood, youth, and early adulthood. Geographically, the narratives depict rural life in different parts of Finland.[3]

Methods: Content Analysis and Close Reading

In our analysis we have applied qualitative content analysis and close reading. Content analysis was chosen due to the literary nature of the life writings, as it is suitable for analysing various unstructured written materials (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2018). We read the narratives through the theoretical lens of belonging introduced above, and by paying attention to their nature as life writings. This means focusing on features such as multi-layered temporalities embedded in the texts. We have sought to bring out the authors' personal experiences and meanings given to food, and to contextualize these findings in their cultural and historical context.

First, we collected the writings of women born in the 1950s. Scrutinizing themes embedded in the life writings again and again, we found that food, cooking, and food production were so important to women who took part in the campaign that they wrote about these issues even though the instructions did not mention food as a specific topic. This observation prompted us to collect all the food-related memories from the materials. Next, we further divided the food memories according to different themes. In addition, we scrutinized the texts from two temporary perspectives: by paying attention to authors' childhood memories and their later experiences and interpretations.

The call for life writings had urged people to reflect on their opinions about countryside in the past and in the present day. In several texts, at least at the end, the author describes her current feelings. This was encouraged not only by the campaign instructions but also by the circumstances in the surrounding society, such as the effects of the Covid-19 restrictions (cf. Olsson 2016:161–162). In general, life writings are typically embedded with multiple layers of time: the past times depicted in the narratives (here, e.g. childhood in the 1950s), the time of writing (e.g. the pandemic 2020–2021), and future orientations (e g. worries about the future of the Finnish countryside and food production). The authors oscillate back and forth to the time remembered and to the moment of writing. Analysing the texts also requires the researcher to travel between different time levels (cf. Vehkalahti & Suurpää 2014; Hytönen 2016:331).

The authors recall experiences from 50–70 years ago and share their thoughts on the 2020s. They commented on the past experiences through their later knowledge; for ex-

ample, by pointing out practices that would not be recognized by children of today, or voicing criticism that was not possible at the time things had happened. In producing the texts, the authors evoke, select, organize, and explain their memories (Abrams 2010:78–79). It is also important to note that interpretations of life course events may change over time, and people may tell about their lives in different words to different audiences (Linde 1993:31; Åström 2007:39–40). Here, the authors knew that their texts would be read by researchers interested in rural history and used in a museum context. They may have composed their texts according to what they anticipated the researchers to value in their texts.

In addition, we have used close reading as a method of analysis. In close reading, exact reading of the texts several times opens new perspectives on the life writings. In this study research materials are limited, which made it possible to read the texts systematically numerous times. From an early point, we also wrote down observations of the texts. This processual approach has been essential in analysing the materials (Pöysä 2010:338–341; Pöysä 2015:31–32; Brummett 2019).

In the following, were analyse food-related memories from the viewpoint of rural belonging through three main themes. The first theme arising from our content analysis is *self-production and preparedness*, which were strongly underlined by women who expressed their connectedness to the countryside through food-related memories. Secondly, we focus on the *expressions of non-belonging in food-related memories*. It is also important to note that food-related memories are not always positive. Negative childhood experiences – especially memories related to hard work in food production – were associated rather with alienation from rural life and values than with belonging. The third main theme arising from our content analysis is the theme of *transgenerational transfer through food.*

Principles of Self-production and Preparedness at the Heart of Rural Belonging

According to the ethnologist Pilvi Hämeenaho, the possibility of self-sufficiency is often perceived as an important principle in the rural lifestyle (Hämeenaho 2018:170). Growing up in the countryside in the 1950s gave women an understanding of how food is produced, and abilities to produce food on their own. This was perceived as a valuable skill by the majority of the authors participating in the "My Countryside" campaign. Women appreciated that they had learned many skills that had been useful for them later in life. They also felt that rural childhood and youth had given them the ability to take action, as there was always something to do in the countryside. If you didn't know how to do something, you learnt by doing.

Growing vegetables, planting and harvesting potatoes, fishing, collecting berries and mushroom were mentioned as skills that women have learned and used as adults. They had carried on these skills throughout their lives. Even if there had been times when, for example, keeping a vegetable garden had not been possible, women nevertheless felt that, if necessary, they could put in a vegetable garden. Even women who had never utilized these skills later in life, considered the skills and potential capability important.

Planting potatoes, growing potatoes, and bringing new potatoes from the field directly to the table is an experience that will be passed on to every generation as a wonder and gift of nature. Berry forests, a piece of land and a small vegetable garden have enabled me to understand the cycle of nature, to be self-sufficient and to enjoy recreation in nature. (089_N_1954)

Picking blueberries, lingonberries and mushrooms is still a pleasure, it is always relaxing and good to be in the forest. (057_N_1955)

In Finland, summer cottages are a widely shared tradition that is practised throughout the country and by people of different social standing (for Finnish summer cottage traditions, see e.g. Alasuutari & Alasuutari 2010; Valkonen 2022). The number of summer cottages increased especially from the 1970s onwards, when living standards rose and leisure time grew. This increase followed the years of the so-called Great Migration, when members of the Finnish baby-boomer generation reached the age of establishing their own families. The majority of them had roots in the countryside (Official Statistics of Finland). For many Finns, retreating to the peace and quiet of nature is still important. People want to enjoy nature, picking berries and mushrooms. The people over 45 years of age in particular have holiday homes. For many, it is important that the summer cottage is close to ancestral lands. The place may have been bought, inherited, or received from siblings (Adamiak et al. 2015:35–36; Kaartinen 2016:315, 318; Löfgren 1999:112).

Summer cottages were often described in terms of security and belonging: "Every time we drive there, it feels like going home", as one of the authors put it (043_N_1956). At the cottage the authors could repeat rural everyday tasks that were familiar to them from their childhood. In these descriptions, narratives of belonging, feeling at home, and feeling a sense of security are intertwined with concrete descriptions of being close to the land and being able to produce your own food:

The holiday home in the countryside is a place to spend time all year round, a strong base for us. In the country house, we have the garden as a hobby and nature as our source of inspiration. (038_N_1950)

For many women, the production of their own food, such as vegetables and berries, was particularly important in summer cottages. It could be that some of these women had even bought the cottage with this purpose in mind. The summerhouse garden made it possible to grow food if there was no possibility to do so in the city. Some authors describe how they had visited their childhood homes regularly to help with food production in their early adulthood. Gradually, the focus had shifted to their own homes or summer cottages. Some women did not need a cottage but were content with a piece of forest from which they gathered berries, mushrooms, and firewood.

Authors also described how growing up in the countryside in the 1950s–1970s taught them to prepare for exceptional circumstances – like the Covid-19 pandemic. Women had learned how to cook and preserve food. Shops were far away, and usually only food items that could not be produced or made at home were bought. Coffee, salt, and sugar were bought from a small village shop or later from a mobile shop, sometimes things such as sausage, lemonade, sweets, ice-cream, etc.

1. Harvesting carrots at my grandmother's home in the countryside in the early 1980s. My aunts are in the picture. (104_N_1956) Photo: "My Countryside" collection. Finnish Museum of Agriculture Sarka.

And if there was no flour to bake with, you had to wait days to go to the village shop. Preparedness is one lesson I have learned at home without being taught. (089_N_1954)

Preparing food requires planning, creativity, and ingenuity (Knuuttila 2006:23). Women born in rural areas in the 1950s wrote about how they had always lived as if prepared for exceptional circumstances. It had been an everyday part of life and not much of a big deal, as they described it in their narratives.

The "My Countryside" campaign took place during Covid-19 restrictions. The Finnish Government, in collaboration with the President of the Republic, declared that Finland was in a state of emergency due to Covid-19 in March 2020 (Valtioneuvosto 16.3.2020). This was exceptional, and constantly changing restrictions characterized the whole period during which our thematic writing campaign took place. At the same time the Finnish society also witnessed a new debate about the security of supply, domestic food, and people's preparedness – things that had hardly surfaced in the media over the last few decades. This was reflected in some of the life writings by women, who reflected on the current debates in relation to their own lifestyles and values inherited from their childhood:

Rural areas are our security and our future in the sense that we have to be self-sufficient in case of possible crises… this has also been observed recently… thankfully. (104_N_1956)

It is important to note that the pandemic period encouraged the women to write about preparedness more actively than they might otherwise would have done. The instructions for life writings did not directly ask about preparedness or the impact of Covid-19. However, these issues were so prominent in the surrounding society that many women addressed the topic in one way or another. Otherwise, women might not have written about how they had learned to prepare for unexpected everyday situations. At the time of unexpected changes, however, their rural background emerged as a new kind of asset, a source of strength. They related to problems of mobility, illness, or power cuts, which had taught them skills that were important when facing the pandemic, too. These women had always had food, medicine, toilet paper, emergency power, etc. at home. Planning for the future was essential; what to produce yourself, what to buy in the shops, how to store food. The ability to cook and do small repairs at home was perceived as important. According to Flora Mary Bartlett, a full and functioning freezer in particular creates a sense of security for people living in rural areas. A freezer can be a central part of preparing for everyday situations, but also for extraordinary circumstances (Bartlett 2023). By taking part in the call for life writings the women may also have been motivated to document exceptional times. (For more on the motives for writing, see Clark & Ivanič 1997; Salonen 2022.)

In Finnish society, the traditional norm of not wasting food has been replaced by new arguments combining discourses of environmental protection, sustainability, and circular economy features (Raippalinna 2022:18). In the present society, increased environmental awareness has underlined the problem of food waste and how to reduce it. However, the generation of authors discussed in this article is less often recognized as environmentally aware consumers and they do not necessarily present their lifestyle as environmentally friendly, even if it is (cf. Nyrhinen & Wilska 2012; The Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra 2019; Kestävät kaupunkiympäristöt 2018).

Life writing offered women with rural roots a chance to express their own values and consumption habits freely. Women reported how they used all their food and there was only a little food waste in their households. For the women that participated in the "My Countryside" campaign, thriftiness had been part of everyday life all their lives, part of their rural belonging. In the following quotation, however, the author makes the connection, pointing out that understanding food production also helps to change lifestyles to be more environmentally friendly.

> Having lived in the countryside, I know that you can't just throw food away, you buy it or get it when you need it and compost the rest. In the country, we were casual about these things before. Once you become aware of the impact on nature, it is easier to change your ways of doing things when you have a link to food production. (089_N_1954)

Food-related Memories of Non-belonging

Most participants in the "My Countryside" appreciated rural food, food production, and the values and things they had learned in the countryside. However, not all food-related memories and stories submitted to the campaign are positive in their tone. Some of the authors found rural child-

hood very difficult. In these narratives the authors describe work that was too hard for their tender age. Women described various tasks related to dairy and farming as well as cooking. Caring for oversized vegetable gardens and endless fields of potatoes had caused anxiety, physical and mental issues, and nightmares.

In these narratives difficult childhood experiences were also described as having had a major impact on the authors' later lives. In fact, harsh childhood experiences – especially memories of hard work in the food production chain – played a key role in pushing some of the authors away from the countryside. They had not wanted to follow in the footsteps of their parents' physically draining agricultural work. In the present day, when reflecting on their life, these women expressed relief at escaping these jobs, for example, through education.

In these narratives food-related memories constituted an equally central part of their relationship to countryside as in the narratives of authors discussed earlier, but in a different way. For them, food-related memories were intertwined with emotions such as anxiety, stress, helplessness and frustration in a way that had contributed to their detachment from countryside and rural life. These memories had led some of the women to avoid childhood work like cooking and food production as adults. For example, the vegetable garden reminded some women of so many unpleasant memories that they did not even consider having their own garden. They wrote about how they appreciated home-produced food, but they did not want to produce it themselves at all. They preferred buying everything ready from the shop. Some of the women felt the need to explain why they no longer produced any food themselves, like the following author:

> I have no interest in living or spending time in the countryside; I don't even own a summer cottage. Sometimes in the summer we rent a cottage for a week in the countryside. I live in a house in the city and could have fruit trees and a vegetable garden in the yard, but I don't, as I have no interest in cultivation. I've had enough of farming. Since I was a little girl, I had to work in the fields all summer long, from dawn to dusk, making hay, making silage (AIV feed), weeding a field of swedes, picking potatoes in the rain from the clayey soil, etc. Those jobs are still coming out of my ears, even though I haven't done them for 35 years. Fortunately, I had the intelligence and tenacity to get a university degree and I got into the clean indoor jobs, even though they are sometimes really hard. But you have evenings, weekends, and annual holidays off, which you hardly ever had in the countryside when you had to go to school in the winter and help with various farm jobs at weekends. (028_N_1959_B)

The quotation is emblematic of the connections between food and rural belonging. Between the lines the author notes that tasks like gardening and cultivation are important for many of her age with rural roots – even something that is expected from them. She seems to assume that it is exceptional that one doesn't even wish to have a summer cottage. For those women who wrote about self-preparedness, tasks like growing vegetables and preparing food from home-grown supplies were important everyday performances (cf. Cuervo & Wyn 2017) that reinforced their sense of belonging in the countryside over again. However, for this author the very same traditions were a constant reminder of negative life experiences, a source of non-belonging.

If we had to name one narrative that dominates among all the life writings submitted by "My Countryside" participants over 60 years of age, that would be the narrative of hard work. "You had to be unseen and grateful for everything and work hard to earn your own food", as expressed by a woman born in 1951 (035_N_1951_B). This is hardly surprising, as the emphasis on hard manual work has been found to characterize several other life writing collections (e.g. Vehkalahti 2014; Laurén & Malinen 2021), as well as Finnish autobiographical and fiction writing in general (e.g. Stark 2011; Kortteinen 1992).

It is also important to contextualize the life narratives of women born in the 1950s in the Finnish Post-war development. Reasons for the hard work required of children varied, but after the Second World War, living standards were generally low and work was valued, and everyone had to work hard to put food on the plates. This concerned especially small rural holdings that had been established during the post-war resettlement programme, which offered veterans of war possibilities to become independent farmers. Some parents also had unrealistic expectations of their children's work. Especially in families with many children, the value of children could be defined by their ability to participate in work. Children also worked hard to gain respect and parental approval. Shame and other negative feedback were common methods of education in many homes. Blaming children for laziness made them feel guilty (see e.g. Laurén & Malinen 2021:209–210, 214–215).

To write about your life and memories for the archive and for research purposes is different from telling about your life to friends and family members. Some authors find the anonymity of writing important, and feel that they can write about memories that have been too difficult or painful to share with their own families, for example with their own children or grandchildren. On the other hand, as the folklorist Carola Ekrem points out, in today's culture of sharing personal stories and honestly expressed opinions, people may be freer to describe their own past than in earlier times (Vehkalahti 2014; Ekrem 2016:94).

Personal, free-form sources such as life writings offer an intriguing avenue to the richness of everyday experiences in rural Finland, as there are both striking similarities and huge variation among the narratives written by people with different backgrounds. For some, manual work in food production was hard, but at the same time joyful. For others, it was an extremely exhausting struggle. Some emphasized how they now – at the time of writing – valued the lessons they learnt and understood their parents better, while for other writers the memories remained sore and unreconciled.

In the following quotation, a woman born in the late 1950s returns to her vivid memories of a vegetable garden she had to look after as a child. She compares her nightmares to those of her war veteran father. Men screaming in their sleep at night were common nocturnal memories in many families in Finland in the post-war era. The nightmares caused veterans to suffer from sleeplessness and anxiety, which they sometimes relieved with alcohol (Kivimäki 2021:306). The author felt that the endless nightmares she had must have been similar to those of her father.

Carrots, beetroots, and onions wandered in my nightmares. The weeds must have roared in my dreams the way armies did in my father's dreams. Deeply ingrained in my mind was the necessity of maintaining a vast vegetable garden well into adulthood. But the time came when I no longer waited for spring and summer to put my hands in the soil, as many of my city-dwelling friends did. (096_N_1957)

The narrative is a telling example of the rural legacy inherited by women born in the 1950s. The necessity of a vegetable garden was deeply ingrained in the mind of the author. Even though it was laborious to keep the garden that was a constant source of anxiety, and a permanent reminder of the bodily emotions she had lived through in her childhood, she nevertheless felt obliged to go on for years. The narrative closes with reconciliation and relief, when she realizes that she can let it go and stop keeping the vegetable garden. Yet there is also some wistfulness involved in the description of how she no longer waited for the spring to put her hands in the soil.

Transgenerational Transfer through Food

The knowledge, skills, and attitudes passed on in rural families are at the centre of many of the "My Countryside" writings. Several authors returned to affective and bodily memories of childhood tastes associated with safety and security – and with a sense of belonging in a transgenerational chain. In the following, the author remembers her parents through memories of food and food-related family traditions:

In the winter, when I was still under school age, I went to take afternoon coffee to my father in the forest, where he was working with his horse. I have a memory of a nice moment sitting on the side of the sleigh with my father in the winter forest, drinking coffee. We children were allowed to drink coffee if we wanted to – I did. In the first grade at school, the worst thing was when the school didn't give us our afternoon coffee. So, my mother, who was waiting at home, always had coffee ready for me when I came home from school. (089_N_1954)

From the perspective of belonging, these bodily memories connected to coffee are intriguing. By drinking coffee and being trusted with coffee-related tasks the child was included in the family as an equal member on a par with the adult members of the family. Secondly, vivid memories of sitting in her father's lap in the forest, sipping coffee, or enjoying coffee after school are associated with security and parental care in the memories of the grown-up author. Coffee links her to a chain of rural generations and reinforces her membership in the rural community (cf. Anthias 2006; Habib & Ward 2019).

As the oral historians and indigenous scholars Sara Wood and Malinda Maynor Lowery have pointed out, food and traditions related to food play a central, albeit often implicit and unrecognized role in constituting a sense of community. Preparation of food and following of traditions passed on by previous generations is a way of recreating bonds of community (Wood & Lowery 2015). On a more general level, positive childhood food experiences have been found constitutive for a sense of security later in life. Memories of food and meals can provide a secure foundation from which young adults can build their own lives. Good food memories have been associated with a sense of coping and resilience (von Essen & Mårtensson 2017:216).

Transgenerational bonds are an important dimension of rural belonging (Vehkalahti & Ristaniemi 2022). For women who wrote about food and food-related practices, belonging was not only about connecting with the past, but also about passing their rural values down to future generations. They wrote about the skills they themselves had taught their children and grandchildren; how they passed on an appreciation of nature, cooking, preparedness, and self-production. They described how they had taught their children and grandchildren to grow potatoes and other vegetables, pick berries and mushrooms, and reminded them to always keep food at home.

> For them – now already adults – the farm has probably given a sense of responsibility, of how food is produced, how nature is cared for and how to live in winter when there are no streets, shops are far away, it's a long way to the slopes and the beach, etc. (089_N_1954)

The memories of older people can be influenced by the views on life of children and young people today. "My Countryside" participants were happy if their family members appreciated their efforts. In their narratives women born in the 1950s marvel at the urbanized youth of their families. On the one hand, they are amused, but at the same time sad. Younger generations did not always understand the importance of their rural lessons. For some of these authors it was hard to understand how far their families' daily lives have departed from the traditional farming life. They were the last of their families to have any experience of living in the countryside, and rural life was strange for younger family members.

For some of these women, the summer cottage had become a site of transgenerational transfer: a place where they especially tried to pass on to younger generations principles like preparedness, the rural way of life, and the skills they themselves had learned in their own childhood countryside. As the ethnologist Yrsa Lindqvist reminds us, Finland's Everyman's Rights allow also urban residents to pick berries and mushrooms, so you don't necessarily have to own a summer cottage, for example, to pass on these skills to the next generation (Lindqvist 2009:103).

If younger generations understood the value and importance of the countryside and preparedness, women felt they had succeeded in their parenting. In the following, one of these grandmothers describes her joy when watching the younger generations navigate the challenges posed by present-day changes in the Finnish countryside. She recognizes how life has inevitably changed in the countryside, but the all-important sense of belonging is still there:

> My own attitude to the countryside is encouraging. I've watched young people be brave and enterprising. They work together as a family and one of the family can work outside the farm, as well as from home. It's so important for them to raise their children in the countryside, through which freedom and closeness to nature is strongly instilled, at least in the young people in my family. (013_N_1949–1951)

Discussion

In this article we have analysed life writings depicting the Finnish countryside by women born in the 1950s. Participation in the call for life writings gave the recipients freedom to write in their own way and according to their own wishes. This is a key feature of life writings, which has

clearly emerged also in this study (e.g. Latvala 2016). The time of writing during the Covid-19 restrictions has had an impact on the texts. The pandemic may have created a need to evaluate the meanings of the countryside from a new angle. It may also have led women to reflect on the skills and attitudes of younger generations. In their life writings they present their own perspectives and voices stemming from their experiences in relation to current issues. The pandemic period seemed to give significance to some of the everyday values and encouraged women to write about these topics.

Food was discussed in a myriad of ways in the texts, but close reading of the life writings against theories of belonging highlighted something that linked most of them: when writing about food, the women were writing about their connectedness with the countryside and rural life. While connections between food, memory, and emotions have been addressed in recent ethnological studies (e.g. Sutton 2017; Marshall & Pétursson 2022), food and food-related practices have not been recognized in the same way in existing literature on belonging. We suggest that food and food-related practices can be viewed as one of those mundane, often indiscernible everyday performances, which co-constitute a sense of belonging when repeated over and over again (cf. Cuervo & Wyn 2017; Harris et al. 2021). Based on our material, food memories and repeated practices associated with food were in the very heart of the authors' identification with rural life; affective memories of childhood tastes associated with safety and security, bodily memories of working in the fields and cowsheds for food, and finally descriptions of how the authors sought to maintain their belonging through repetition of food-related traditions in their present life. For many, food-related memories of childhood and youth had been a lifetime resource.

Three major narratives of belonging emerged from our analysis. First, narratives that underlined the *importance of self-production and preparedness* as the core of rural identity. In these narratives women described how tasks like collecting berries, following the harvest season and growing your own vegetables in the garden connected them to the rural life and childhood memories and created a strong sense of belonging. Exceptional circumstances like the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the value of preparedness.

Secondly, there were narratives where expressions of *non-belonging* in the countryside were grounded in food-related memories. Here too, food and food production were recognized as an integral element of rural life, but from the standpoint of belonging, the impact was the opposite of the first category of narratives. In the narratives including vivid descriptions of negative food-related memories these memories were linked with gradual detachment from belonging in the rural milieu. Contradictory feelings of both belonging and non-belonging characterize some of these accounts, as the same authors may not wish to continue the traditional practices, but they may nevertheless have felt obliged to do so. This reminds us of the partly unvoluntary and inexplicit nature of belonging: rural roots are something that the people themselves have not deliberately chosen, but rurality follows them nevertheless.

The third main theme arising from our analysis is the theme of *transgenerational transfer through food.* On one hand the authors emphasized food-related practices inherited from their parents and grandparents as a central element constituting a sense of belonging. On the other hand, food had an important role in passing care and affection on for their own children and grandchildren. In particular summer cottages served as a site of belonging, not only for the women themselves, who could connect to their rural roots there, but also as a site for passing this legacy – knowledge about food and rural skills – on to future generations.

Our analysis gives support to studies that have underlined the fluid, processual nature of belonging (e.g. Harris et al. 2021). We see belonging as a process, which requires active confirmation and reworking, and is shaped by the cultural and historical context. In the life narratives of women born in the 1950s personal life histories intersect with wider historical developments (such as post-war agricultural policies and modernization). Food and food-related memories stand at the intersection of these processes: food reflects changes in society, but it also offers possibilities to experience continuity and tradition. Some of the female authors had witnessed a considerable social change in their lives, but food and certain food-related practices connected them with the past, creating a sense of security. Hence, it could be concluded that in this respect food may offer for some of the authors a mode of belonging that Vanessa May (2017) has described in terms of belonging from afar: belonging to the past in the present day.

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Notes

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2 The Mass Observation Project (MOP) is a documentation project of everyday life in Britain launched in 1981. The project involves a panel of volunteer writers responding regularly to given topics. MOP is often referred to as a parallel example to the Finnish practices of thematic writing campaigns, e.g. Kivilaakso, Pesonen & Taavetti 2022.

3 To avoid identification, we refer to the respondents with numerical codes. The first part of the series of numbers tells the participant's serial number, N refers to the author's self-defined gender (female) and the last number tells the participant's year of birth. All participants were Finnish-speaking and lived in Finland. Texts were originally written in Finnish, extracts have been translated into English for this article. Most respondents had grown up in the countryside, some were city-dwellers who wrote about summers spent in the countryside, either at summer cottages or at their relatives. The majority of participants had out-migrated to urban settings later in their lives.

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The "My Countryside" collection is to be preserved in the archives of the Finnish Literature Society at the end of the research project.

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