



Silenced memories

**Women's history as a topic and Oral history as a method.
Transfer between International Youth Projects,
Educational Practice and Research**

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Introduction

Annemarie Franke

Women's history as a topic and oral history as a method. Transfer between International Youth Projects, Educational Practice and Research

Anna Walentynowicz from Gdańsk, commonly referred to as the legend of Polish Solidarity movement, is certainly part of the mainstream narrative about the history of the fall of communism in Poland. You can find her biography on book shelves written by different authors; there are documentary films and movies like the famous and controversial film "Strike" by German film director Volker Schlöndorff.

I was very surprised when I learned via the new book by Dorota Karaś and Marek Sterlingow (Walentynowicz. Anna szuka rajku [Anna is searching for paradise] published in 2020) that all these documents left out an important piece of information about the biography of this woman, who died in April 2010 travelling with the Polish President on the plane to Smolensk. She took to her grief a secret that she had kept for herself throughout all her life - she was born in an Ukrainian family; her parents were national Ukrainians and her relatives stayed in post-war Soviet Ukraine.

I think this is a perfect example for the topic of our project – women's history and silenced memories. During the time when we were preparing our schedule for the May 2020 seminar in Krzyżowa (Poland) for multipliers in non-formal youth education dealing with oral history, we discussed with the partners our understanding of women's history and gender studies. At the beginning, we wanted to focus on fostering the female view and historic experience in the field of this kind of educational projects. We came

to a point that the project is not actually about the lack of women's view on history or historic experience in the general narrative, rather it is about memory, and the question arises of what it is in a concrete setting of time and space that we are willing to know and trying to learn.

In the case of Anna Walentynowicz, she clearly did not want to talk about her family roots, while historians or journalists were also not bothered by these questions, rather by aspects of her life in times of the Polish People's Republic and her impact on the Solidarity movement. The silencing of parts of her life story did not follow a gender pattern, however I still wonder whether it was connected to femininity. My interpretation would be that her story as a female hero of the Gdańsk shipyard is extraordinary enough, and became throughout the years so political that nobody would try to look into her family roots. Now, ten years after her death, it just so happens that a journalist got interested by this Ukrainian theme and following this path, tried to take into general consideration voices not heard yet about the life and work of this historic figure. Whether we lift the silenced memories depends on our interviewees as well as on ourselves and our perspectives about history.

Therefore, coming back to our project and this publication, we wanted to discuss with practitioners and academics on how to deal with new approaches to the method of oral history, and show how to include the idea of our topic "Silenced memories" in future youth projects.

We based this on our experiences organising youth projects called *HER-Story* as for the Kreisau-Initiative (KI) and *In Between?* as for the European Network Remembrance and Solidarity (ENRS) for several years. We wanted to share our experiences and networks and develop new expertise focussing on the topic of women's history and silenced memories. Please find in the following chapter short descriptions of the two educational projects being the starting point of this endeavour.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic we were not able to organise the planned encounter at the Krzyżowa International Youth Meeting Centre throughout 2020. Building on discussions about this encounter, we wanted to publish guidelines or best practises concerning oral history and youth projects. We finally decided to turn the project the other way around, namely that we would start with the online publication and hope to have an encounter with practitioners and experts from different countries and disciplines in the future, in order to discuss the essays we present to you in this reader with each other.

We invited five authors, part academics and part practitioners working with the method of oral history. We asked them to share their thoughts on the term of "Silenced Memories" and to reflect on new challenges for research and education with historical witnesses. The presented essays shall serve as an inspiration for anybody who is dealing or wants to deal with the topic of "Silenced Memories" in future youth projects. Furthermore, they shall enrich the discussion on oral history as a method in academia as well as in the field of formal and non-formal youth education.

We are very grateful for the contributions and the co-operation of Piotr Filipkowski, Dominik Kretschmann, Małgorzata Łukianow, Merle Schmidt and Johana Wyss, and hopefully we will meet in Krzyżowa for personal exchange and further discussion on the presented topics.

HER-Story

- Women's role in the past and present

Carolin Wenzel

In Between?

Annemarie Franke

An international project for high school students

Since 2013, the Kreisau-Initiative e.V. has been implementing the *HER-Story* youth exchange project for young people aged between sixteen and nineteen years old from Germany, Croatia and Poland. The initial idea of the project was to throw light on the underestimated role of women in history and the reception of these women nowadays. The first project principally dealt with the role of women in the “Kreisau Circle” (German: Kreisauer Kreis) resistance group against National Socialism during World War II in Germany. Those women were usually confronted with the stereotype that they only prepared beverages and food for their husbands who were being engaged in the resistance. That these women were usually very well educated, informed and actively engaged in the activities of the resistance group as well as that they consciously risked their own lives and those of their children in order to serve a higher goal, was never really appreciated or at the least paid attention to. High school students from Germany, Croatia and Poland dealt with these silenced memories of the women of the Kreisau Circle by interviewing family members that were still alive at that time.

In the following years, we developed the topic further by dealing with individual stories of women involved in the resistance in Germany, Poland and Croatia during World War II and after. Additionally, more recent topics such as gender equality, the development of women's rights, sexual identity etc. complemented the historical part of the project. The young participants not only interviewed historical witnesses but also young female activists that stand up for women's rights nowadays. Filming is an essential part of

the project. This tool allows the participants to creatively process the newly gained experiences and knowledge.

Oral history and interviews with contemporary witnesses constitute the core method of the project. We decided to use this powerful educational tool in order to make voices heard: the voices and stories of women that are not yet well documented in literature or any other media. Our young participants are preparing, conducting and post-producing these interviews themselves. In this sense, they gain the chance to create their own sources and make aspects of history and recent times heard that were and are still silenced.

HER-Story gives its young participants impulses in order to think about gender stereotypes, their own role in the society and how to raise their voices against injustice and discrimination. When asking participants what kind of new inspirations they found during the project, a young woman answered: “In the future I want to stand up for what I think, I want to work hard for what I want and become braver.” By showing them not only historical examples but also recent ones of young women being involved in gender related issues, they become aware of social grievances and get inspired to stand up for their own rights.

HER-Story is explicitly not only a project for young women - young men *and* young women are invited to participate. It is especially the young women in the project who usually find it extremely important that young men should also deal with these issues. This is an approach

that the organisers of *HER-Story* follow as well. "Women's rights are Human Rights!" is another conclusion of one of the participants.

Further insights about *HER-Story*:

To get a better insight of the *HER-Story* project, please have a look on our blog as well as a project video that have been created last year by young participants of the project.

- [Project video from 2013/14](#)
- [Project blog \(2015\)](#)
- [Project video from 2019](#)
- Project videos from 2018:
 - [Project video](#) (created by the participants)
 - [Interview with Hana Grgic](#) (Women's rights activist from Croatia)
 - [Interview with Katarzyna Batko-Tołuć](#) (female activist from Poland)
 - [Interview with Bärbel Schindler-Saefkow](#) (daughter of the resistance fighters Aenne Saefkow and Anton Saefkow)
 - [Animation Movie Women's Rights](#) (created by the participants of the youth exchange)

An educational project for students and young professionals focused on oral history

Participants are given the opportunity to conduct oral history research in the European borderlands. Gaining theoretical knowledge and interdisciplinary and practical skills, they collect audio and video recordings of individual historical narratives as well as scans of private photographs in order to share them with museums and historical archives.

The participating students represent various fields of interest, including history, cultural anthropology, sociology, linguistics and arts. First of all, they take part in interdisciplinary workshops, learning the basics of conducting interviews, digital video camera operation, photography, digitalising visual materials, labelling collected materials with metadata, and the necessary historical contexts.

Following that, having been split into smaller groups, they travel to the borderland regions in order to speak with representatives of the local communities.

After travelling to the particular borderland region, the participants conduct and document interviews with local inhabitants. When programming the study visits, the European Network Remembrance and Solidarity (ENRS) co-ordinators place special attention on reaching out to representatives of different groups, especially if they seem to be misrepresented in mainstream historical narratives. The aim is to learn local history from different perspectives.

Depending on the particular region, there could be representatives of national and ethnic minor-

ities (Roma, for example), or – simply – female historical witnesses.

Finding interviewees who are women sometimes becomes a challenge. It happens that communities delegate the authorities (former mayors, persons with academic background) first, and it requires more effort to get in touch with a woman willing to share their story. For example, this was the case in Mostar, and to change the programme's dynamics, we established a partnership with the Bosnian NGO *Zena B&H*. As soon as we did that, there turned out to be several women willing to share their stories.

Some obstacles are not only caused by gender, but as a mixture of different factors (intersectional marginalisation). On the other hand, we manage to collect some unique memories, sometimes due to the perfect ambience as well as the thoughtful and prepared students conducting the interviews, together with the wonderful open-minded approach of the women speaking with us.

Interviews are always conducted in the interviewees' first languages. Before conducting interviews, the teams study the interviewee's biographical facts and brainstorm about possible questions. Understandably, they follow all the methodological basic rules of conducting biographical interviews.

In 2016 and 2017, the ENRS organised sixteen study visits in collaboration with seventy five local partners all around Europe. We collected raw materials (video and audio files) documenting 186 interviews, conducted in seventeen different

countries and in twenty one languages by ninety four *In Between?* participants. We explored the following borderlands:

Lubuskie Land – Transylvania – Bukovyna – Banska Bystrica – Czech-German-Polish borderland (Liberec) – Hungarian-Croatian borderland (Pecs) – Austrian-Slovene borderland (South Styria) – Transcarpathia – Berlin (divided city 1945-1989) – Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina) – Polish-Lithuanian borderland – Vojvodina (Serbia) – Catalan cross-border region – Hungarian-Romanian borderland – Prespa lakes region – Albanian-Montenegrin borderland

The following editions had a slightly different character. In 2018 we were only able to offer two study visits to Rijeka (Croatia) and Skalica (the Slovak-Czech borderland as well as the Moravian-Austrian borderland). In 2019 and 2020 we changed the format of the project, changing the focus from oral history to photography and called these editions *In Between? – image and memory*.

Projects of the ENRS are financed by the Ministries of Culture of the ENRS member countries of Germany, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. The 2016 edition was co-funded by the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union. The 2017 edition was co-funded by the International Visegrad Fund.

Besides the important local partners, there are some strategic partners to be recalled here: Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe, FINA (Filmoteka Narodowa i Instytut Audiowizualny) in Poland and the EU-screen platform.

The project received a special mention of Europa Nostra Award 2018.

Sources: ENRS website and conspect by Karolina Dzielak (ENRS Senior Project Manager until 2020)

Further insights on *In Between?*:

- www.enrs.eu
- <https://enrs.eu/inbetween>

Ressources:

You can find project videos from nine different border regions here:

<https://enrs.eu/video/list?project=in-between>

There are also some articles written by participants or project co-ordinators based on the sources and interviews collected during the study visits. Check out the menu “ressources” of every edition.

Follow up of the project videos and materials:

In 2020, the Evens Foundation and EuroClio published educational materials inspired by the project videos of the *In Between?* editions. The ENRS was one of the partners in the project team preparing these learning activities. **(Re)Viewing European Stories** is an educational project that aims to encourage and promote historical-critical thinking among high school students and teachers.

<http://blog.euscreen.eu/reviewing-european-stories/>

The Power of Silence and Silencing Power

Johana Wyss

This essay provides a conceptual terminology and introduces the notions of ‘silence’, ‘silencing’, ‘dominant narrative’, and ‘counter-narrative’. It demonstrates the interrelation of these four concepts as well as offering a useful vocabulary to understand borderland regions. It finishes with an example of a problem-based learning activity.

The Notion of Silence vs The Act of Silencing

Traditionally, we tend to think about **silence** as an absence or a void. However, in many cases, silence is in fact a powerful means of communication. For example, it is often used as a highly emotional tool in commemorative rituals, like the two-minute silence held to remember victims of war. It can relate to the desire to achieve peace and to connect with the divine through meditation and prayer, as is the case in Buddhist or Quaker silent practice. Silence can be also an active way of resistance, where the decision to refrain from talking requires a considerable amount of willpower, such as not to divulge a hiding location of political prisoners. However, silence can also tell us about a culturally tabooed subject of which one is not meant to speak publicly, such as menstrual cycle; or indicate danger and fear, as is evocatively described in Harry Potter novels featuring “You-Know-Who”.

Silence is much more than just a lack of sounds. It does not exclusively belong to a singular domain, rather it oscillates between liberty and restriction, conflict and reconciliation, presence and absence, as well as hope and fear. It is precisely this multifaceted and somewhat chameleonic nature of silence that makes it a fascinating, but also notoriously difficult subject to investigate. However, regardless of how challenging the study

of the many forms and meanings of silence can be, focusing on this subject can significantly deepen our understanding of not only how individuals but also society as a whole operate. The type of silence that I am particularly interested in is ‘historical silence’, referring to fragments of the past that is available and meaningful in the present day (people know about it/remember it either personally or vicariously), however we do not officially talk about it or commemorate it. It is silenced. For the purpose of this essay, I wish to distinguish between two related while distinct terms: the notion of ‘silence’ and the relational act of ‘silencing’.

Silencing is an active attempt of a social actor (individual, group, or institution) to directly or indirectly assert their power to silence another social actor. Silencing is thus fundamentally different to forgetting, which, in my reading, is not prescriptive. If a social actor is forced to refrain from remembering, it is a form of silencing, not forgetting. Silencing, as an act of causing another social actor to fall silent, can also take multiple forms. For instance, a religious group can attempt to silence marginalised groups, such as LGBTQ+ by the threat of excommunicating them from the church they belong to; totalitarian regimes can silence their opponents by imprisonments or by sending political prisoners into labour camps; criminal organisations like the mafia can be

silencing their victims by killing them; or nation states sanitise their past wrongdoings by silencing compromising narratives in the national school curricula, such as the case of whitewashing the USA's history textbooks, as one example among many. Silencing is always political, serving particular purposes, and reflecting current societal power dynamics.

Dominant and Counter Narratives

As a social anthropologist, I am primarily interested in researching social structures and dynamics. In particular, I try to entangle and explore existing power dynamics by scrutinising who is silencing whom, how, and why. Asking these questions can help us to better understand both visible and hidden power relations with a given society, as well as to tell us more about the ambitions, hopes and fears of the social actors involved. Some of the most telling examples of silencing can be found on the borders of places, social situations, and identities that do not conform to existing dominant narratives, norms, standards, beliefs, and expectations. It is often the 'in-betweeners' that most profoundly challenge the dominant narratives of social reality that the majority of us take for granted.

Dominant narratives, originating from the perspective of groups that hold power and privilege, are told in service of the dominant social actors and their ideologies and interests. Such narratives usually become dominant through an assertion of the dominant social actors' power, and through the act of silencing other possible in-

terpretations and alternative accounts. Dominant narratives are then further normalised through repetition and the process of naturalisation, that makes them appear natural, given, objective and apolitical. In opposition to dominant narratives are so-called **counter-narratives**. They contest taken for granted assumptions arriving from the dominant narratives by providing alternative readings, stories, and explanations. Usually employed by marginalised groups that do not belong to the dominant strata of society, such as political prisoners, members of LGBTQ+, or ethnic, religious, and cultural minorities, counter-

Dominant narratives are then further normalised through repetition and the process of naturalisation, that makes them appear natural, given, objective and apolitical.

narratives offer alternative explanations of what, how and why something has happened. Owing to the unequal power structures in a society, these counter-narratives are being systematically silenced in what Michal-Rolph Trouillot calls "bundles of silences"¹.

Borderland regions

In late 2017, I was very fortunate to take part in the *In Between?* project (see p. 11). The main purpose of which was to provide an opportunity for outstanding students to gain new skills and to conduct their own oral history research in the European borderlands. As my own ethnographic research focuses on Silesia (a region spreading across the Czech Republic, Poland, and Germany) and the tension between dominant and counter-narratives, I was amazed to hear about very similar phenomena occurring also in other 'torn' places marked by a turbulent past and volatile present, such as Catalonia, Vojvodina, Mostar, Prespa; or the Hungarian-Romanian,

¹ Trouillot, Michel-Rolph (1995) *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press

Albanian-Montenegrin, and Polish-Lithuanian border regions. These regions are often figured as objects of contestation between stronger neighbours, forming diverse political unions, such as kingdoms, empires, 'blocks', or nation-states. As a result, these regions and a number of their inhabitants have a different historical experience compared to the rest of the respective countries into which they belong today; they often share only fragments of what is considered 'national history'.

National histories - as codified in grand national monuments, commemoration practices, and school textbooks - are examples of a dominant narrative par excellence. They represent much more than just another highly selective account of the past. They provide a sense of unity, homogeneity, belonging, loyalty, but also an obligation to defend the nation by all costs. By definition, however, they also lay out frameworks for those who are said to not belong, those who are excluded (not only from the narrative but from the society), who are thought of as inferior and the 'common enemy' against which the nation defines itself. Furthermore, as these narratives function to also legitimise the status quo, their message is in line with the hopes, needs, and fears of currently dominant social actors. Once the power dynamics in a society changes, dominant narratives then change accordingly.

Borderlands such as the ones named above, however, often find themselves on the margins

of power, economic wealth, and the majority population. They are contested spaces inhabited by populations on the margins - such as Silesians in Poland, Catalans in Spain; Slovaks, Hungarians, Bunjevci and others in Vojvodina etc. - whose sense of collective identity, belonging, and their historical experience often clashes with the one of the majority population. They can be seen as peripheral borders on one hand, but also, at the same time, as the centres of a conflict between dominant narratives and counter-narratives. Therefore, at the end of this essay, I would like to invite you to listen to silences coming from the borderlands. What are their forms and what are their meanings? Are they the result of silencing or are they related to different domains and dynamics? If the former, is it possible to determine who is silencing whom, how and why?

National narratives function to also legitimise the status quo, their message is in line with the hopes, needs, and fears of currently dominant social actors. Once the power dynamics in a society changes, dominant narratives then change accordingly.

Exercise Guide for Teachers²

Can students identify a case of silencing?

Who is silencing whom, how, and why?

Guide

Encourage students to draw on resources provided by the *In Between?* project in order for them to select one case study for further analysis. It is essential that the students have some background knowledge about the region, as well as about the national contexts in which the region currently belongs to.

The student should then try to answer these questions:

Who is being silenced?

Who is committing the silencing?

How is it enforced?

Why is it taking place (why would a social actor want to engage in a counter-narrative and why would another social actor want to silence such a narrative?)

Goals

Help students to identify cases of silencing and how they function.

Help students to be aware of the existence of power dynamics within society.

Encourage students to think critically about dominant narratives and counter narratives.

Challenges

Requires advanced level of analytical and synthetic thinking.

Presupposes familiarity with the method of 'sociological imagination'.

Students' personal investments (conscious or unconscious) in dominant discourses.

Requires background knowledge of historical, political, and cultural circumstance of a chosen region.

² Inspired by a discussion-based lesson plan on dominant narratives from Inclusive Teaching Resources, University of Michigan. More information can be found here: <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/sample-activities/dominant-narratives/>

Oral history and silenced memories

Piotr Filipkowski

Whose voices are heard? Whose are silenced? Are these voices treated in their singularity and subjectivity, or do we see their words as exemplifying objective historical facts and processes? History, both “big” and narrated by any individual, is always an interplay of voices and silences. This article aims at encouraging us to approach history in a more sensitive, nuanced and also critical way.

Oral history is about voices. The most popular introduction to the field which serves as a kind of handbook is Paul Thompson’s “The Voice of the Past. Oral History”¹. Its title is very significant. It contains a strong epistemological declaration: the stories narrated by people today, in the present, should be treated as records of the past, as historical sources that can inform us about what had happened and what people had experienced years or even decades ago. This approach presupposes a correspondence between historical reality and its memorial or linguistic representation. This kind of “realistic” understanding of people’s memories and narratives is far from obvious in contemporary academic historiography and even less so in social sciences. Thus oral history as a research method which focuses primarily on the “real” past has been confronted with strong criticism in the last few years. This criticism has made practitioners and theoreticians of oral history much more sensitive to methodological and theoretical questions – and much more nuanced and also convincing while defending its specific realistic perspective. That is the case even if the latter is not shared by everyone who finds themselves under an oral history roof.

Oral history as a powerful tool of “giving voice to the voiceless”

There is, however, another message hidden in the title of this famous book by Paul Thompson. From its very first pages, we are encouraged to understand oral history as a powerful tool of “giving voice to the voiceless”. This is meant not only as an intellectual, but also as a historical-critical and thus a political tool. Indeed, much of the oral history practice all around the world in the last few decades has been driven by this very motivation.

Many, if not the vast majority of oral historians – both within and outside academia – want and try to conduct interviews with *ordinary people* who are absent in written documents, that is in traditional historical sources accessible in the archives. Doing it, they often declare that they are giving justice to the past, acting against oblivion and filling gaps of mainstream historiography. The voice of these ordinary people that has been expressed, recorded and published (although mostly still as a text) is contrasted with the previous silence. Voice is valued positively here – as presence, truth, and justice. While silence is seen negatively – as absence, void, the lack of truth, and injustice.

¹ The book was first published in 1978 by Oxford University Press and its recent, extended and updated fourth edition co-authored with Joanna Bornat comes from 2017. It has also been translated into many foreign languages – the Polish edition is planned for 2021.

The relationship between these poles is not neutral but rather antagonistic. Ordinary people are not only perceived to be “forgotten” by historiography and collective memory, but often also as actively *silenced*. Nonetheless, dominant political history silences them by focusing on important historical heroes, usually men who were having political or economic power. Social history that once promised alternatives to such a political-historical perspective and declared a focus on ordinary people, tends to aggregate the latter into big groups: social classes, generations, cohorts, inhabitants of particular territory, etc.. Even historical anthropology, which offers innovative, insightful historical micro-analysis of particular places in particular historical times, is not necessarily always interested in subjective perspectives of singular historical actors – individual women and men.

Oral history can support all these different historical approaches that extend and pluralise our understanding of the past. However useful it may be in this service, it should not be reduced to a mere research method. I am convinced it has its own, independent perspective to offer. Its own historical – but also very actual – voice. What kind of perspective, what kind of voice is it, then?

First of all, it is very individualised. We do not need to decide here whether oral history is more the voice of the historical past or rather of the narrative present to realise that this is – in the first place – the voice of an individual person who narrates their life experiences. Not infrequently

Our interlocutors are above all interpreters of their own experiences and observations, and not (and certainly not only) informants of the past that really happened.

attempting to share their “entire” life story. A sensitive oral historian – interviewer, researcher, interpreter or any other user of existing recordings and interview transcripts, including teachers and students – should be able to hear this singular voice. While this may be seemingly obvious, this task can be quite complicated. Particularly if we approach our interviewees as representatives of social groups, milieus or genders. For it is very likely that we will then treat their words as exemplifying objective historical facts and processes – losing sight of singularity and subjectivity of these voices.

Subjectivity as important feature of oral history

Yet subjectivity is the second most important feature of oral history. Our interlocutors are above all interpreters of their own experiences and observations, and not (and certainly not only) informants of the past that really happened. This subjective – that is to say, person-specific – insight into their individual experiences and emotions determines the strength and uniqueness of oral history. Of course, there are other historical sources that give access to these subjective dimensions of the past – such as diaries, memoirs or recollections. Despite that, writing ego-documents remains a rare and quite elite activity – and autobiographical stories can be orally narrated by almost anyone, even if forms of these narratives may vary greatly. Therefore the spoken word is much more democratic than the written text. It gives access not only to so called ordinary people’s experiences, but also to ordinary experiences of, potentially, everyone.

In this way, we have taken a shortcut from an oral history which corrects historiography by giving voice to silenced groups, to an oral history which gives voice to a particular person - an ordinary person, although, in this perspective, anyone can be seen as ordinary, regardless of their social status, authority, agency, power and influence. Here we can stop and reflect on the silence in individual testimonies, focusing not on a historical lack of knowledge, rather on individual reasons for such a silence. Understanding the former is no less important than trying to get rid of the latter - though the two may be directly and strongly connected.

To see it from yet another perspective, in giving the voice to (historiographically) silenced individuals, we also bring their particular silences to the surface - at least getting a chance to become aware of them. Each story, written or told, is obviously selective, though not necessarily in the same way. Oral history is not exceptional in this respect. Our interviewees select what was - and still is - important to them and what they want to share with us during the interview.

However if they are asked to narrate their "full" life story, they must give coherence to their diverse, biographically dispersed, experiences. They must connect them, or at least try to do it, into an autobiographical meaningful plot. This sense-giving narrative process makes them sometimes narrate episodes, events, experiences that memory very spontaneously evokes. Biographical sociology calls them narrative compulsions.

Balance of publicity and privacy

As a consequence, each oral testimony is a combination of selected and non-selected but

still narrated stories of experiences - as well as of those forgotten, omitted and silenced by interviewees. The silenced ones are important here especially when the latter is the case. This deliberate silencing may have various reasons. Traumatic characters of the past experiences that have not yet found their way to storytelling is one of them. Literature interpreting oral testimonies of "survivors" of the Shoah, concentration camps, gulags, forced labour and many other atrocities of the last century, may help us hear and even understand these silences. This is done however without offering a definitive interpretation key that would fit to every traumatic silence. The deliberate silencing might however be also motivated by a wish to protect the privacy of interviewees and their important others - relatives, friends, partners. Oral history - though so individualised and subjectivised - is still oriented to the public. It has its audience, and interviewees are usually well aware of that. To that end each of them defines the border between those experiences which can be shared with the interviewer - and the public "behind" them - and those which are intimate and must stay private. Every oral historian probably can recall moments when that border was negotiated with the interviewees - and maybe also re-negotiated, when they realised that they narrated more than they had wanted.

**“History is almost never
black or white”**

Interview

Dominik Kretschmann, head of the Memorial Site in Krzyżowa, talks about the importance and benefit of the oral history method in international youth exchange.

Dominik, please tell us in a nutshell which historic topics you are dealing with at the Memorial Site of the Krzyżowa Foundation for Mutual Understanding in Europe?

All historic topics in our work have a strong connection with the 20th century. Specifically with the National Socialist dictatorship in Germany, resistance against the Nazi government – (especially the group inseparably connected with Krzyżowa, the Kreisau Circle [Kreisauer Kreis]), World War II, the Shoah, the aftermath of World War II with large parts of Europe being dominated by the Soviet Union, the reconciliation process between Poland and Germany and the struggle for democracy and independence of the people in those central and eastern European countries, that led to the massive changes of 1989.

All these topics are (to a greater or lesser extent) dealt with on a local, regional, national and international level.

How do you work on these different historic topics and who is your target group?

There is more than one target group. It is an "International Youth Meeting Centre" but "Youth" spans from children aged seven to ten to teenagers, to young adults and also to teachers and facilitators coming to Krzyżowa for advanced training. Therefore the methods we use are diverse. Allow me a brief digression: meeting others with an open mind and engaging in a dialogue are at the very heart of our work – for both aims we do not *have* to deal with history. Sustainability or arts for example, can 'get the

job done' just as well. This being said, it is still obvious that the multitude of historic topics connected with the place influence practically every project taking place here.

From which countries are young people coming to Krzyżowa?

The majority of our guests come from Poland and Germany, both groups are roughly the same size. The next largest group are young people from the Ukraine. However we have guests also from France, the UK, Turkey, Czech Republic, Belarus, Spain, Israel, South Africa, among others.

With our guests we do workshops and BarCamps, we offer guided tours of the grounds of Krzyżowa Foundation and we also invite contemporary witnesses and do oral history projects with them, empowering young participants to reach out for less or unheard stories, waiting to be heard.

What about oral history as a method in youth projects or educational projects in general at the Krzyżowa place?

The oral history projects taking place in Krzyżowa are very important to us – but they are not a daily occurrence. As far as I can see, there are three reasons for that: 1. The members of the German resistance group Kreisau Circle, who met in Krzyżowa more than seventy five years ago, are long dead. Even their children are elderly people by now, not happening to live nearby. 2. Even the actors involved in the changes of 1989 are not so young anymore and some of them – especially in Poland - are now

to be found in different political camps that are extremely critical of each other. Some of them do not want to talk about their experiences in the past.

Can you tell us more about your experience with the instruments of oral history in your projects?

Yes, that is number 3. The most important reason: Oral history projects require more time than most projects with young participants can offer. There has to be training for those who go to talk to contemporary witnesses; the interviews themselves take time and afterwards there is follow-up work to be done.

For all that, whenever we manage to do such a project, it is a very rewarding experience to see how attractive the approach for young people is. Here they are, in a real situation, listening to stories that might be told for the first time, capturing something for future generations and feeling like real researchers (and rightfully so).

How have you prepared young people to conduct the interviews?

We usually look for partners that specialize in the field. Ośrodek Pamięć i Przyszłość (Memory and Future Institute) in Wrocław for example. This helps to prepare the participants for the interviews. It is also important to share historical background information, in order that the young researchers have a general idea of the time in question.

How do you usually prepare a meeting with time witnesses in the context of international students' or pupils' groups?

We provide historical background information and try to illustrate the difficulties and limitations of contemporary witness interviews.

The challenge is not to damage the testimony quality as a side effect.

We also have to talk about language: During international projects it is rather often the case that not every participant will understand the witness; translations are necessary and it takes patience to listen carefully to something one does not instantly understand.

If you do record these meetings or interviews, how do you use or disseminate the recorded material once the interaction with young people is finished?

Often the recorded material is used for an exhibition or publication emerging from the project. Co-operation with other institutions, as mentioned before, also offers the possibility to hand the transcribed interviews over to an archive.

What can young people expect from a conversation with a contemporary witness? What can they learn from it?

Young people can expect to experience something real, not just a recording or words in a textbook but an actual person speaking, getting at times emotional, possibly struggling to find the right words or the chronological order. What can they learn from it? At best, that history is almost never a picture painted in black and white and that usually individuals have a certain leeway in their decisions.

Where do you see the limits of this method? Can a conversation with a contemporary witness replace a history lesson?

The strength of the method is the very personal experience – and that is also its limit. *One* person tells about things in the past. And they

tell it in the way it is remembered after many, many years. Therefore it can not replace a history lesson, quite the contrary, some sort of history lesson is needed as preparation of such an experience.

In our project we want to draw attention to "silent memories". Can you tell from your experience in Krzyżowa whether there are such silenced memories you would like to explore?

There are of course many steps between silent memories and those unmistakably loud. It can depend on place and time, whether a memory is silent or not. In the field of Polish-German relations there are aspects remembered well in one, but silent in the other country. It is one central task for us to tackle those. Last year, for example, we remembered Willy Brandt kneeling in penitence in Warsaw, fifty years ago. This gesture was very present in the collective memory in Germany – however it was a silent, silenced memory in Poland until 1989, because the communist government was not interested in the picture of a very humble western German chancellor. Additionally, on a local level there are many, many untold but fascinating stories of people who lived a so-called "normal life" during the last sixty or eighty years, around Krzyżowa as everywhere.

Young People talking to Contemporary Witnesses

**- Dos and Don'ts for a successful
history workshop**

Merle Schmidt

Nazi forced labour is one of the lesser known histories of World War II, especially when talking about civilian forced labourers. Using this example, the article describes a course of contemporary witness talks, including their preparation and follow-up, possible dangers for the method in formal and non-formal education, and advice for educators and teachers.

History is for many young people hard to grasp. Talks with contemporary witnesses rank highly on the list of teaching methods in formal and non-formal education, since they often attract more interest than simply learning about dates, places and events from a history book. Through this method young people deal with history through the biographies of men, women and children, by listening to their stories, being able to ask questions and gaining a glimpse into the people behind the facts in history books.

Spark a new interest: forced labour as a silenced memory?

Contemporary witness talks can open up new topics and perspectives for young people. They are especially important when they are about topics that are often not taught at school. Talks with former forced labourers are one example. Forced labour during the Nazi era is an under-represented topic, despite the large number of forced labourers: Up to thirteen million people from all over Europe, mainly from Eastern Europe, were deported as forced labourers to the Third Reich. In addition, another thirteen million people did forced labour for the Third Reich in Nazi-occupied territories. When being deported, the forced labourers were often not much older than the young people listening to their testi-

monies today. However, why can the history of forced labour be seen as a silenced memory? It was hard and often impossible for forced labourers to talk about their experiences when they came back home after the end of the war, especially for those from the Soviet Union. They were under suspicion for being collaborators, were questioned by the authorities, sometimes even imprisoned and often discriminated against for their whole lives when for example applying for going to university or a receiving job. It also had an influence on their personal lives because many of them for a long time did not even tell their families about their experiences as forced labourers. Another example are the stories of female forced labourers. With up to one third of the forced labourers being women, their stories can be seen as a silenced memory in themselves. Taking a look at women from Western Europe, mainly from France, Belgium and the Netherlands, they were in a difficult situation when coming back home too. Many people viewed them as collaborators regardless if they went to the Third Reich voluntarily or if they were deported as forced labourers. They were also often discredited because there were rumors of the women having a fun life during the war or having affairs with Germans. When taking a look at Germany, the history presents itself differently: Although forced

labour was present in daily life during the war with forced labourers working in factories, households, on farms or for the churches, forced labour for a long time was not seen as Nazi injustice per se but rather as a side-effect of the war, and was therefore not or just partially part of the remembrance. These are just a few examples, however they show the long way of making the history of forced labour being heard, talked about, remembered and becoming part of curricula. As a result, talks with former forced labourers can spark new interest among young people in an under-represented topic, and can motivate them to learn more about it.

Why do people who experienced war, persecution and terror do contemporary witness talks? Why do they share their story, a story many other people would rather like to forget? Many contemporary witnesses see it as their task to educate young people in order to avoid that history repeating itself. By talking about the horrors they experienced, they deal with their own history which they often were not able to talk about for years.

At the same time, it is important to take a look at the limits of contemporary witness talks as a teaching method. It is essential to always see testimonies as a person's narrations, as an incomplete subjective report. Over time, focuses on historical events often shift with a person's memory, being blurred or mixed up with memories of other people, aspects from books or

Therefore the reflection of what is said in a testimony, its critical analysis and the comparison of the story heard with historical facts are essential when using testimonies in the classroom, even though or especially because it is emotionally touching.

the media. All these things need to be kept in mind and need to be reacted to when using testimonies as an educational method, because especially young people are often so fascinated by meeting contemporary witnesses. Hearing their stories can lead to the state of believing them more than facts from history books. Therefore the reflection of what is said in a testimony, its critical analysis and the comparison of the story

heard with historical facts are essential when using testimonies in the classroom, even though or especially because it is emotionally touching.

Logistics, historical knowledge, respect: Preparation of the talk

The beginning always contains the search for a contemporary witness. The task to find a person is sometimes not that easy. It is possible to ask in local history museums or also in churches or old people's homes. Sometimes it is worth looking in the young peoples' personal surroundings, for example by asking grandparents or other relatives. Whereas in this case you need to be aware that young people should not interview their own relatives, as they might not be willing or able to talk freely about their experiences. Having found a person willing to share their story, a meeting with them is necessary in order to check if they are suitable, healthy and fit enough to do the talk and if their story fits the topic you want to discuss. Afterwards, the planning of the talk can start. The lesson or workshop consists of three parts: preparing the contemporary witness talk, carrying it out, and following up on it.

A good preparation of the talk is needed, one with the contemporary witness themselves and one with the group meeting them.

The goal of the preparatory meeting with the contemporary witness is to discuss the content and key topics of the talk, and to inform them about the group of people they will meet, the course of the talk and organisational issues (logistics, special assistance, permission for photo/video documentation, fee, translation etc.).

The preparation with the young people consists of several parts: First of all, they learn about the historical context and the biography of the contemporary witness in order to have a basic background knowledge before hearing the contemporary witness's story. There are multiple ways to do this. One of them is a timeline to see how the person's biography is connected to historical events. When working with an international group of participants, it is necessary to keep in mind different levels of knowledge and also different (emotional) connections to the topic. Second, during the preparation it needs to be discussed, for example on the basis of a brainstorming, what a testimony, a narrative and memory are in order to contextualise the testimony and analyse it critically. Connected to that is the next step where the participants talk about their expectations as well as the advantages and disadvantages or dangers of a contemporary witness report. Before the participants discuss possible questions for the contemporary witness, they learn about the course of the talk and need to be made aware of certain rules: The contemporary witnesses are old people that need to be treated respectfully and with dignity. This does not mean that critical questions cannot be asked but that they need to

be asked in a sensitive and respectful way and if the contemporary witness does not want to answer them, this needs to be respected. This should be kept in mind when developing the questions and throughout the whole meeting.

An environment of trust: young people meeting contemporary witnesses

For the talk, it is important to create an environment in which the contemporary witness and the group feel comfortable. It is necessary to have a moderation, not just for the structure of the talk and the discussion afterwards but also to give the contemporary witness a contact person for support and guidance. The contemporary witness should only talk in the language they feel comfortable with, even though that might make a translator necessary. Each meeting is different but the general structure is always the same: After an introduction by the moderator, the contemporary witness tells their story by sharing memories, reading out of their memoirs or by showing pictures, documents or other mementos. Following this, there is time for questions and/or a discussion. In general, the meeting lasts about ninety minutes, depending on the contemporary witness and the age of the participants.

Emotions and reflection: Follow-Up

The follow-up session should be used to contextualise and interpret what has been said, to discuss and clarify open questions, to clear up misunderstandings and for emotional support of the participants.

The first step of the follow-up is on an emotional level by asking the participants how they feel after the talk and if they want to share their emotions or facts that made them upset, sad or angry. The

discussion can be done in small groups to create an environment in which the participants feel safe about sharing their feelings.

The follow-up on the historical level can also be done in small groups by discussing open questions and by making the young people reflect on what they heard in the talk about the stages of the contemporary witness's life, their childhood, life during the war, life after the war etc.. The young people can also discuss the following questions in groups: Which topics were (not) discussed? What was new for you? Which topics were emotional? Is there anything to add to the timeline from the preparation? Are there contradictions between facts and testimony? What did you learn?

Not an effect on their own: Conclusion

Testimonies are an invaluable experience for the people meeting contemporary witnesses and hearing their stories. However in order to create an added value, a good preparation and follow-up and a well-planned pedagogical support are vital. Testimonies do not have any effect on their own, but only in the context of history lessons or workshops, as what is heard must always be contextualised.

As there are only a few living contemporary witnesses from the time of World War II left, the meetings that still take place are infinitely valuable. There are many initiatives to fill the gap left by the death of the contemporary witnesses, e.g. through holograms or conversations with the 2nd and 3rd generations. Nonetheless, no matter how good and important

these methods are, they can never replace the personal account of a person who witnessed history live.

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Testimonies do not have any effect on their own, but only in the context of history lessons or workshops, as what is heard must always be contextualised.

Oral history and social distancing: online tools and potentials

Małgorzata Łukianow

The article proposes combining two practises: 1. the situation of staying home and socially distancing, together with 2. drawing inspiration from online collections of oral histories while seeking for stories that were silenced in the past or are still being marginalised.

With the progression of time, historical witnesses are passing away. Monuments have been erected and their biographies have been written for the grand figures of history, even if sometimes those grand narratives are being distorted with our current needs, by what heroes we need and by how we interpret the past. Meanwhile, many other voices, not as popular and not so obvious, are quietly disappearing.

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic is constantly broadening our ideas about how many aspects of our lives and activities can be performed online. A growing number of resources are made available online and it is now up to us to discover how much was already online - including stories that were silenced in the past or are still being marginalised: stories of women, minorities; stories that do not fit the officially supported vision of the past. Indubitably, a personal narrative is perceived differently during meetings compared to those listened to from recordings. It is a challenge to keep the rich message it sends and stimulate the imagination when listening to (or watching) a recorded long interview.

For many years now, researchers and other professionals have been collecting thousands of recordings, of which the vast majority are available online. The purpose of the collection from the

beginning was to store the stories of historical witnesses for other people, regardless of their profession. Thus they provide a great resource for those who would like to either become familiar with the method or are looking for valuable information and experiences.

Teaching oral history – teaching empathy

If there is anything that oral history is about other than “histories”, it is probably the empathy that one can derive from personal meetings with witnesses. The experience goes beyond the story itself and includes feelings, imagination, and mutual understanding. It serves as the ability to feel other people’s mental states; the ability to adopt their way of thinking and to look at reality from their perspective.

How can we foster empathy in the situation of two-dimensional meetings? Which tools do we need to prepare this kind of talk with witnesses? It is essential to embrace what the components of a biographical narrative are. Oral history goes beyond the story itself and embraces affective attitudes as well as ways of telling the story. When watching or listening to the story, students or participants should be encouraged to explore all the angles of narratives.

Understanding both historical and contemporary human choices and viewpoints can be practiced

with sources that provide a plethora of different experiences. Why would some people emigrate, leaving their homes and past? Were they allowed to stay? Why did some people decide to join the resistance or a conspiracy, whereas others decided not to? Who felt like a 'real communist' and who never did? Is any answer wrong? The media and popular discourse often tell us that the answer to this is yes. However based on first-hand accounts, students and participants can see all the shades of grey, difficult backgrounds and hard choices that stand behind simplified narratives in the public and media debate.

An example of such broadened understanding is an exercise used during the project *HER-Story* in 2019 (see p. 8). We asked our participants, is it true that women were passively suffering the atrocities of the war? Who is "talking" about this; whose voice is heard? Women are very often portrayed as passive victims in books and the imagination of popular culture. We tried to show that women can actively shape history – both as positive heroes, as well as perpetrators.

Through the lens of the contemporary era, we tend to see choices as only moral and almost freely made. Another dimension of empathising with a witness is the contextualisation of events and possibilities. When working on personal stories during the project *HER-Story* in 2019, we focused on ways that emotions can be represented: movements, vocalisations, and other forms of expressions. Reading emotions is a tough challenge, nonetheless an attempt to see them or

recreate them through other means of communication can bring interesting results. Here you can see the movie made by the participants, which embraces the more emotional side of history. Our participants, instead of re-telling the story, used their bodies to express the more emotional side of history.

However based on first-hand accounts, students and participants can see all the shades of grey, difficult backgrounds and hard choices that stand behind simplified narratives in the public and media debate.

As a researcher working in the field of collective memory and oral history, I find it constantly astonishing how people who seem insignificant from the point of view of a history textbook (Monika Sznajderman calls them 'people forgotten by history') talk more about human nature than is found in books. However to grasp this specificity we must underline that dealing with personal narratives is also about empathising with a narrator. It is often the case that people who, on a daily level, devote

little space to reflecting on their past can develop their historical awareness. Oral history is not only a piece of work that enables the collection of accounts and information. It is also a form of involving individuals in history – both their own and the witnesses', be that personal or social. Through the process of reflecting on the history of another person, participants or students have a chance to relate to facts from their own biographies as well as events from their own lives. This can serve as an interesting exercise when listening to oral histories online.

Going beyond textbooks

Another important skill that history teaches is an exploration and critical analysis of sources. This often takes place in contrast to lessons at school,

where textbooks focus on a unified narrative about the past. School curricula tend to show history as a closed process, while this supposition is often proven wrong when new research is shown or, more importantly, when governments change and demand new heroes for their policies.

When taking a dive into oral history repositories, students can find varied voices and resources. Users of oral history archives can browse different topics and either listen to the whole narrative and thus better locate the whole personal experience of a narrator, or focus on a selected part of the life of a witness.

Oral history archives, just like any other data repositories, are created for different purposes by different people. A meta-level of a critical analysis should as well embrace an answer to the following questions:

- What kind of repository is it?
- Who recorded the accounts?
- When?
- For what purpose?

The essential skill, crucial for those interested in oral histories, is active listening. When moving the activities online, this appears even more important. Active listening includes maintaining eye contact, showing interest in what our interlocutor is saying (e.g., with appropriate gestures), refraining from commenting or giving advice, and asking additional questions about what the other person is saying. Obviously, the majority of these are impossible to implement when watching or

listening to biographical accounts. In a two-dimensional setting, one cannot ask questions or comment. Nonetheless, watching experienced interviewers conduct meetings with witnesses provides an excellent example on how to master active listening, which is a skill necessary in many areas of life.

Memories of hardship

When we try to give meaning to our own experiences, we tend to investigate history and stories from past times. Are moral virtues only assigned to grand figures that have been commemorated? Or should we seek out “smaller” names, not falling short when it comes to everyday heroism?

Among many others, the COVID-19 pandemic raised questions about everyday struggles that we face as individuals and as a society: insecurity, the fear of death, and being separated from our loved ones. A course of difficult events and instability often bring into light memories of hardships known from other times in history. For example, while the panic and fears related to the new disease were growing, some shops saw

Seeking for historical parallels between contemporary and historical struggles might be a fertile ground for a discussion about the role of historical knowledge not only at school, but also in everyday life.

shortages. Especially in post-Soviet and post-communist countries these often evoked memories of the past, and the strategies that people used to deal with it. Traditions of surviving a pandemic are vague, to say the least, but the experience of the crisis is not uncommon

in oral history narratives. Seeking for historical parallels between contemporary and historical struggles might be a fertile ground for a discus-

sion about the role of historical knowledge not only at school, but also in everyday life.

Conclusion: what oral history teaches us

The aim of this short text is to show that even though encounters with historical witnesses are rather two-dimensional in an online setting, it is not a lost case, for everyone interested in oral history shows us the human aspect of history – with emotions, struggles and many topics written in between the lines. Staying involved and concentrated appears as a challenge when the meeting is not conducted in person. It is far from enough to be able to only reconstruct the course of events in the life of a witness. A person dealing with a personal narrative has to keep in mind all other dimensions of a personal account – such as affective attitudes, narrating style and the broad historical context. Being able to go deeper into the emotions and individual dispositions of another person greatly helps to develop empathy and listening to another person, even if they can only see this person from a distance and on our screen.

Online Resources

Gdynia: Museum of Emigration

<https://archiwumemigranta.pl/en/>

The Emigrant Archive is a project aiming at collecting and presenting emigration stories of Polish people.

POLIN Museum

<https://sztetl.org.pl/en/oral-history>

The Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews includes over 800 oral history accounts of mainly Polish Jews, their descendants and Poles who were witnesses of the Jewish fate.

Europeana

This European multi-language portal collaborates with thousands of European archives, libraries and museums to share cultural heritage. One of the collections deals with testimonies of World War I.

#everynamecounts

The initiative of the Arolsen Archives, an international center on Nazi persecution with the world's most comprehensive archive on the victims and survivors of National Socialism, aims to establish a digital memorial to the people persecuted by the Nazis and offers a new and very direct way of actively engaging with the past.

www.euscreen.eu

The EUscreen portal offers free online access to thousands of items of audiovisual heritage. The main objective of the project is to aggregate a comprehensive amount of professional audiovisual content. A large number of clips and programmes have been selected by broadcasters and archives from all across Europe.

Biographical notes

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Piotr Filipkowski is a sociologist, oral historian and assistant professor at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. He co-founded the Oral History Archive at the History Meeting House in Warsaw and is a researcher in various historical and sociological projects devoted to biographical experiences of the war, socialist modernisation and the capitalist transformation in Poland and Eastern Europe. He is the author of a monograph: *The Nazi Concentration Camp Experience in a Biographical-Narrative Perspective* (Berlin 2019).

Dominik Kretschmann studied law in Germany and Russia. Since 2007, he has been working for the Krzyżowa Foundation for Mutual Understanding in Europe (Poland), currently as head of the memorial site. His occupational focus is on adult education; he is involved in oral history projects dealing with the Jewish post-war history of Dzierżoniów, the Mass of Reconciliation, and a people's history of Krzyżowa.

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