History
- Archive Studies
- Information Science:

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methodological issues
Oral history in modern Poland  
— studies, educational projects, scientific associations

Studies

Oral history in Poland, also known as spoken history, has a relatively long tradition. Kazimierz Dobrowski, the sociologist and ethnologist, as early as the inter-war period, indicated the need for a holistic approach towards sociological studies. His concept of historical and field studies, called the integral method, combined historical and sociological research methods. Highlighting sociological studies of living history and involving it in the historians’ work makes Dobrowski a precursor of the oral history movement in Poland. The first woman to urge the utilization of history witnesses’ oral accounts was Krystyna Kersten in 1968. In 1980, at the XV International Congress of History Related Sciences in Bucharest, Tadeusz Lępkowski separated an oral history, which is passed in a form of an interview, oral account or by a conversation, and knowingly organized by a researcher, from an oral tradition, often recorded in the historical memory of People of Tribes and folk history, which in other words can be called a history “of the second track” narrated at homes and churches. In the following years Jerzy Topolski,

1 Kazimierz Dobrowski, Metoda integralna (Kraków: Praesidium z posiedzeń komisji Oddziału PAN w Krakowie, 1962).

Jerzy Maternicki, Józef Ruchaba were the main figures in the study of oral accounts and historical interviews. Oral accounts have also been acknowledged as a new type of archival documents. Helena Karzewska, Halina Robocka and Bohdan Ryszewski work particularly on this matter. In literature an approach of Polish historians towards this method was presented, as well as an English historiography concerning archives of memory. Reviews of Polish websites discussing these problems were also published. This thesis intends to show how the perception of oral history studies has changed in Poland over the past 10 years, what type of projects are currently pursued and where further studies and works are heading.

Modern studies on oral history are going in several directions. Firstly, this method is perceived as a triggered source and as such is used by historians in their research work. Oral sources are useful in studies carried over many fields of history. We often encounter scientific texts demonstrating these materials’ application in some narrow scientific specializations. By collecting accounts of history eyewitnesses, collections about such subjects as
the 2nd World War, postwar trauma, early postwar years, Stalinist times, memory of important events, institutions, places, family histories, and others, were compiled.

Secondly, an interest in this method has been revealed in a methodological reflection. Numerous questions have been raised which are still trying to find answers, these are: Where is the correct place for an oral history in historical sources classification? What kind of bibliographic de-


15 Marta Kurkowski-Budzan, Antykomunistyczne podziemie zbrojne na Białostoczku (with CD) (Kraków: Historia Jagiellonica, 2009).


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accounts and teachers are organized, and reviews of works dealing with oral history are published.  

**Research and educational projects**

There are several professional centers in Poland focusing their studies and working methods on oral accounts. A centre which has to be mentioned most of all is the „Brama Grodzka – Teatr NN” Centre – the self-governing institution established in 1996. The Centre mainly pursues a project named “Oral History”, which aims to record Lublin citizens’ histories describing events concerning the city itself and Polish history. It also collects accounts of witnesses to more contemporary events, from the 1980s onwards. The Centre has created an Archive of Oral History (hereafter called AOH) which has so far collected over 1100 accounts. Three and a half thousand accounts (including information on interviewees’ surnames, dates and places of birth, and circumstances of interview recording) were made publicly accessible on the centre’s portal in 2009. As well as photographs of the interviewees, there are also personal photos of places, family members and friends. “Brama Grodzka” completes several projects a year. In 2009 the main ones were: “Following footsteps of Singer – laureates of the Nobel prize in Literature”; “Lublin – roads to freedom” – concerning regaining of independence in 1989; “The 70th anniversary of the defensive war in 1939”; “Lublin’s Jews currently living in Israel”.

The second very important research centre conducting studies on oral history is the KARTA Centre, which has been pursuing program named “Oral History” for several years already. The database of the Archive of Oral History covers 1200 accounts of Poles repressed by the USSR, those deported from Eastern Borderlands, prisoners of the Soviet Concentration Camps, soldiers of the postwar anti-communist underground, which were all collected by Eastern Archive between 1987 and 1993. In 2003, a new institution named Media Library of the Warsaw History Meeting House arose and separated from the KARTA Centre, where archives of all collected relations were transferred. Since then these two institutions have cooperated with each other, pursuing several oral history projects. For this reason a special webpa-

g was created where projects are described in details and presented along with pieces of audio and video recordings, photos and personal documents of recorded interviewees. Entire recordings may be listened to at Media Library of the Warsaw History Meeting House. Some examples of the projects are: “Saved from the Mauthausen Concentration Camp”; “Poles and Germans – the 20th century history of the Commune of Stara Kiszawa”; “Women against totalitarianism”; “Europe of the 20th century: Faces of totalitarianism”; “Polish schools in Lithuania – 1937-1991”; “Legnano in the 20th century – a city of Germans, Russians, Poles and Jews”; “A History of the East – post Eastern Borderlands of the II Polish Republic”; “Germans in Poland”; “Cross – Kreuz in the 20th century – a case study of a city”.

As well as the above-mentioned, there can found several hundred other accounts recorded not only by KARTA members, but also by scientists and journalists who have given their recordings to the Centre in order to be digitalized and made publicly accessible. Overall, there are around 3000 recordings in the archive. AOH urges researchers to share recordings made for their own scientific studies or at work in order to expand their accessibility.

AOH also takes up similar activities at the Warsaw Uprising Museum. It is focused on preserving accounts of the remaining veterans of the Home Army (Armia Krajowa, AK, was the WW2 Polish underground army) and participants of the Warsaw Uprising still living in Poland and abroad. Presently, nearly a thousand recordings (many of which are several hours long) have been collected. All accounts are electronically recorded and published on the museum’s webpage. Video recordings will gradually be made accessible in the museum’s reading room. The gathering of those accounts is assisted by volunteers, amongst whom there are both teenagers and professionally active adults, as well as pensioners, annuitants and the insurgents themselves. Recordings collected in the Archive serve as educational materials used in schools, and aid the creation of multimedia publications and educational exhibitions.

Some museums also conduct oral history projects for their own needs and to expand their own collections. The Museum of Warsaw’s Prague might serve as an example. It organizes its own collections by gathering accounts, documents, and photos of one of the old Warsaw districts (Praga/Prague). Another museum is The Museum of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn, where since 2008, there has been a ongoing project named “Poles of the Eastern Borderlands in Warmia and Mazury – Cultural heritage as a knowledge of the region’s present”. In this project memories of the displaced communities from the Vilnius Region (modern day Lithuania) to North – East Poland.

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after the 2nd World War, are collected, as well as documents, photos and other valuable source materials passed by them to the museum. Due to the assistance of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum in Oswiecim, since 1999 the project "Europe according to Auschwitz" has been conducted. Its purpose is to create a chronicle - reportage of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp based on accounts and testimonies of the events from eyewitnesses and participants - prisoners and SS soldiers. Respondents, however, are not only Poles, but also Jews, Germans, Gypsies, Russians, Ukrainians and Czechs. Within this project international seminars for students of journalism and history are organized annually. The agenda also includes meetings, lectures and discussions held on issues of oral accounts.

The Centre of Civic Education also carries out many projects concerning history. They are all addressed to secondary and high school teachers and pupils. Over the past few years it has mainly pursued a project named "Righteous Amongst the Nations", the purpose of which was to find and present to pupils people honored by Yad Vashem with the title of "Righteous Gentile". The stories of those people who, by putting their own and their families' lives at risk, rescued Jews from certain death, is not only a lesson of history, but most of all, of tolerance, common understanding and great heroism. There is another project currently being run named "I will tell you about Free Poland", which aims to arrange meetings between teenagers and history eyewitnesses. The next edition of the project (2009) coincided with the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II and the 20th anniversary of communism collapse in Europe.

A special Internet portal called "Learn from history" has been set up for educational purposes. Its aim is to outline to pupils 20th century history, mainly through projects completed by them. One such projects is, "The tears have dried, We've got to move on", during which pupils of a secondary school in Tomaszów Lubelski are introduced to the wartime history of regions closest to their place of residence. They read memoirs, visit places connected with the tragic past, collect photo documentation and talk to eyewitnesses of those events. Other projects include: "Marks of the 2nd World War are saved in memories, monuments and roadside crosses", "In Bełżec and in Zwierzyniec: Martyrdom of the People of Zamojszczyzna", "Changing Perspectives - stories of the expelled" and "Podlasie - searching for tracks".

Scientific projects collecting and analyzing oral accounts are also extremely important. During 2002-2005 an international scientific project was held under the name, "Coming to terms with dictatorship and confirming national self-identity on the outskirts of Europe: Culture of memory in Poland and Spain from a comparative perspective". This project was conducted by the Central and Eastern European History and Culture Study Centre in Lipsk. Zofia Wóyciecka took the part as a Polish representative. Currently, through the participation of the Polish scientists of University of Łódź, a project called "Euroidentities" is being conducted, which applies biographical method and technique of narrative interview in analyzing development and importance of European identity from the perspectives of individual members of European societies. The project is being pursued by seven European countries: Bulgaria, Wales, Ireland, Germany, Estonia, Italy and Poland.

Scientific associations

In January 2009 the first Oral History Association was established in Poland (POHA). Although the initiative originally came from the Artifacts Association from Cracow, it resulted in a nationwide interest among historians. The first meeting of the Association gathered together more than 20 people.

It is a very valuable initiative not only for scientists, but also for history teachers. More and more often secondary and high school pupils are participating in educational projects, collecting accounts of history eyewitnesses, drawing them up as a historical sources and keeping them for their own purposes. Teachers, however, have to contend with many technical and methodological problems of collecting accounts, and with subsequent criticism. However, history researchers also constantly encounter this problem. Therefore, after many years of leading individual research, it was decided to set up a platform for exchanging concepts and methodological reflections on oral history as a research method. That created opportunities to organize conferences, establish shared projects, as well as launching a scientific journal.

The legislative process took a few months. The Association’s statute aims were also drawn up, mainly: to integrate environments of historians - researchers, archivists, museologists, culture animators and other individuals and institutions working on spoken history; to represent Polish spoken history environment on an international forum; to draw up methodological and ethi-
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cause computer memory overload) was raised. Czech colleagues invited the Poles to upload their accounts to the Czech database. Ultimately the portal is supposed to become a general Europe one.

Conference participants concluded that such workshops should be organized annually, and they should become a platform for exchanging information on current projects and scientific problems which might be faced, as well as introducing new publications and individuals working on oral history. Shortly an internet portal will be built by The Polish Oral History Association.

In autumn (November 7-8) 2009 the first workshops were held, which hosted over 30 participants from several centers in Poland. Those attending included representatives from Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Warsaw University, University of Łódź, Warmia and Mazury University in Olsztyn, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Warsaw University of Life Sciences in Warsaw, Bram Grodzka from Lublin, The Media Library of the Warsaw History Meeting House and KARTA Centre from Warsaw, Artifacts Association from Cracow, as well as several journalists and private individuals.

The proceedings were held in the Media Library of the Warsaw History Meeting House where a multimedia exhibition on "Faces of Totalitarianism" (including eyewitnesses accounts) was displayed. Several blocks of subject matter were debated. To begin with, institutions and individuals presented their latest studies on oral history. These were both scientific and project related studies. The second block was devoted to a discussion on legal and authorization problems connected with oral accounts, and then archiving, storing and placing oral sources for public accessibility were talked over. The speakers invoked working methods of the National Digital Archive, which began its activity in 2006 and now owns an enormous collection of voice recordings, numbering around thirty-thousand units, from the years 1919-2007. These are unique recordings of many important individuals from social, political, cultural and religious life, most of which come from the Polish Radio or the Free Europe Radio.

A very important element of those meetings were workshops led by the Czech Oral History Association, during which a portal "Memory of the Nation" was presented. This portal operates in 9 European languages and has many database search possibilities. During a lively discussion, the problems of loading large numbers of multi-hour audio and video accounts (which may