

Open Forum

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Open Forum: Oral History in Holocaust Research

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Abstract: The text contains answers to 5 questions concerning the use of Oral History in Holocaust research in Slovakia and the author's opinions and experiences with the use of this method.

Keywords: oral history collections; oral history; holocaust research; interview technique

1 Why is Oral History Important in Holocaust Research?

Oral history brings to the research of the past an important amount of knowledge linked to the memory of the authentic actors who lived through this past. It thus complements the information and data gathered from various archival documents with a subjective perspective, a view from the micro-level of society. At the same time, it is sometimes the only source of information about certain historical or everyday events that are not otherwise recorded. The main feature of this method (which is sometimes even considered a discipline) – subjectivity – is, in my opinion, one of its main contributions. Thanks to its subjectivity, we have the opportunity to learn about the impact and influence that lived historical events had on the person who recalls them. How the witness processes their memories of these events under the influence of different factors is also observed in our work. As the survivor ‘passes on’ his/her memories, he or she influences not only the memory of other members of his or her family, but also the groups of which he or she is a member (communicative memory). Individual memories thus gradually

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become part of collective (national) memory as well. Oral history also influences the ways in which the Holocaust is remembered in the media or in public discourse. Ultimately, oral history has the potential to shape and complement the grand historical narrative about more than the Holocaust. However, oral history is also of particular importance for Holocaust research because it tells us about the process, phases and forms of the Holocaust in individual countries or regions of Europe. It brings ‘first hand’ reflections and memories – from those who lived through the Holocaust as victims, or who saw it as eyewitnesses from a different perspective, who co-created the context of the Holocaust, precisely where it took place.

2 How Have you Been Working with Oral History, Testimonies or Survivor Stories in your Own Research?

I have been using oral history interviews or survivor life stories in my research since the mid-1990s. At that time, I joined the research team of the very first oral history research focusing on biographical narratives of Holocaust survivors in Slovakia. The project “Fates of Those Who Survived the Holocaust,” which was part of the international research carried out by Professor Geoffrey Hartman and his team from Yale University since the 1970s, was coordinated in Slovakia by the Milan Šimečka Foundation. I am an ethnologist, so qualitative research and research interviews are a major part of my fieldwork. The aforementioned first oral history research has influenced my further scholarly work, not only in terms of methodology and interviewing techniques. It has also given me a focus on the Holocaust period, and the ethical issues related to qualitative research on traumatic events, and especially the importance of respect for the survivors. I have been using oral history (conducting interviews, analyzing, and interpreting them) for almost thirty years as an academic to explore a variety of issues related to the life stories of Holocaust survivors and non-Jewish eyewitnesses alike. I trace the influence of various factors (identity, age, gender, social background, education) as well as the ecology or context of the interview on its final form.¹ I trace the

¹ Monika Vrzgulová, “Interpreting Jewish – non-Jewish relations in two biographic narratives”, in Monika Vrzgulová and Ján Hlavinka (eds), *The Research and Education About the Holocaust in Central Europe* (Bratislava: Dokumentačné stredisko holokaustu, 2012), pp. 235–255; eadem, *Deti holokaustu* (Bratislava: Dokumentačné stredisko holokaustu, 2007); ead., “The Holocaust in Women’s Lives: Approaching a Slovak Oral History Archive,” in Karolina Krasuska, Louise Hecht, and Andrea Pető

narrator's reactions to the events of the great history affecting his or her life, and how he/she reflects and evaluates his experiences with the passage of time. At the same time, I use oral history interviews, biographical narratives and testimonies as an educator. I have been involved in the preparation and implementation of training programs for (mainly) high school teachers and pupils. I have verified the impact of individual stories on their perception and thinking about the past, and its impact on contemporary society. I have been fortunate to have stayed in contact with several Holocaust survivors over a long period of time. I have been able to interview them repeatedly, but also to have informal discussions with them. I have watched them tell their story in front of pupils, in public debates and discussions. These experiences of long-term, repeated contact with Holocaust survivors, and our informal contacts, deepened my understanding of their testimonies, opinions, and life attitudes. Through them, I have moved, as Henry Greenspan says, from "knowing or learning from survivors" to "knowing or learning with them."² The deeper I delve into working with oral history testimonies, the more I realize how important it is when creating new oral history interviews – besides compiling their summaries and transcripts – to leave future researchers with as much information as possible about the narrator, the situation, and the atmosphere when the interview was recorded, as well as about the way the interview was conducted and the possible factors that influenced it, and not least about my own feelings about it. It is precisely this kind of information that is often missing from the databases of video and audio archives of oral history interviews that are now available online.

(eds), *Women and the Holocaust: New Perspectives and Challenges* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015), 99–124; ead., *Nevyrožprávané susedské histórie: holokaust na Slovensku z dvoch perspektív*, (Bratislava: VEDA: Ústav etnológie SAV, 2016); ead., "Memories of the Holocaust: Slovak bystanders", *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 23, no. 1–2 (2017), pp. 99–111; ead., "The memory of the return of Slovak holocaust survivors in Jewish and Non-Jewish testimonies", *Judaica Bohemiae* 53, no. 2 (2018), pp. 53–76; ead., "The Oral History Interview – A Relationship and Space of Trust," *Slovenský národopis* 67, no. 4 (2019), pp. 430–440; ead., "The closer we are, The harder it gets", *Human Affairs*, 31, no. 3 (2021), pp. 299–313; ead., "Remembering the Holocaust after 1989: Slovakia More Than Thirty Years Later", in Paul Srodecki and Daria Kozłova (eds), *War and Remembrance. World War II and the Holocaust in the Memory Politics of Post-Socialist Europe Series: War (Hi) Stories*, Volume: 12 (Paderborn: Brill, 2023), 127–143; Hana Kubátová and Monika Vrzgulová, "Being 'Local' in Eastern Slovakia: Belonging in a Multiethnic Periphery", *East European Politics and Societies*, 37, no. 1 (2023), pp. 249–271.

2 See, for example: Henry Greenspan, "Collaborative Interpretation of Survivors' Accounts: A Radical Challenge to Conventional Practice", *Holocaust Studies*, 17, no. 1 (2011), pp. 85–100.

3 Which Oral History Collections Exists in your Region or Country, and How Have they Been Used in Research by Holocaust Scholars in your Country?

There are several oral history collections in Slovakia today that are publicly available (in a specific institution or online). The very first one is the Video Archive of Interviews of the international project mentioned above, carried out by the Milan Šimečka Foundation (MSF) and Yale University. It contains 148 video interviews with Jewish survivors, their transcripts, and summaries, and 87 video interviews with Roma survivors. They are available for viewing at the MSF for the professional public.³ The Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale University can also be accessed at this location. Furthermore, oral history collections for Holocaust studies are part of the audiovisual archive of the Institute of Memory of the Nation.⁴ Its staff films interviews with memoirists focusing on both non-democratic periods in Slovakia's modern history (the period from the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, World War II, and the Holocaust from 1938 to 1945, as well as the communist period from 1948 to 1989).

Oral history testimonies are also filmed, archived and made available online to those interested by the NGO Postbellum, which manages the Memory of Nations archive, which contains audiovisual recordings of oral history interviews, including recordings on the Holocaust and World War II periods (<https://www.memoryofnations.eu/en/about-project>).

Slovak researchers have been working with oral history testimonies since the end of the 1990s, and apart from me, they are used mainly by scholars who are ethnologists, such as Peter Salner, Ivica Bumová, Ľubica Voľanská and Soňa G. Lutherová,⁵ and also by sociologists and Gender Studies researchers such as Zuzana

³ <https://nadaciamilanashimecku.sk/kontakt/>.

⁴ <https://www.upn.gov.sk/en/project-oral-history-witnesses-of-the-oppression-period/>.

⁵ Peter Salner, *Prežili holokaust* (Bratislava: Veda 1997); idem, "The Holocaust and the Jewish Identity in Slovakia", *Pardes* 16, (2010), pp. 117–133; id. *The Jewish Identity in Slovakia after the Shoah* (Saarbrücken: LAP Lambert, 2013); id., "Emigration, Home, Identity: An Ethnological Examination of the Identity of Jewish Emigrants from Czechoslovakia", *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 41, no. 2, (2021), Article 5; id., "The Holocaust in Slovakia: The Deportation of 1942 through the Prism of Oral History", *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 42, no. 5, (2022), Article 3; Ivica Bumová, "Official anti-semitism in Slovakia after the Second World War (1945–1951)", in V. Tydlitánová, and V. and A. Hanzová (eds), *Anatomy of Hatred: Essays on Anti-Semitism* (Plzeň: Západočeská univerzita, 2009), pp. 38–46; Ľubica Voľanská, Monika Vrzgulová, and Peter Salner, *Rozprávania a mlčanie* (Bratislava: Veda 2017); Soňa G. Lutherová, "Before and After: the

Kusá and Zuzana Kiczková,⁶ whose focus is outside Holocaust Studies. In recent years oral history has been used more and more often by historians such as Denisa Nešťáková, and Michala Lónčíková.⁷ While social scientists are also working with the oral history method to create new interviews, historians are more likely to reach for ready-made testimonies on the platforms of scholarly archives outside Slovakia, such as those of USHMM, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, the Fortunoff Video Archive, etc.

4 What are the Scientific and Ethical Challenges Faced by Researchers of the Holocaust When Working with Oral Histories, Testimonies, and Other Stories from Survivors?

The scientific and ethical challenges that Holocaust researchers face when working with oral histories, testimonies, and other stories from survivors are related to the form of oral history with which they are working. These ethical and scientific challenges depend on whether they are directly conducting an oral history interview (in order to obtain a biographical narrative or an oral history interview on a specific topic); or working with a recorded version of such an interview (audio/video) that they did not personally carry out; or are working with a written transcript; or are using an already published interpretation of the interview material.

Each of these forms poses specific challenges and demands on the researcher – both professional and ethical. Personally, I work primarily with interviews conducted by myself or by colleagues with whom I have collaborated in a research team. Thus, I am thoroughly familiar with the research methodology, the interviewing technique, and the ethical principles that guided the filming of the interviews. This often facilitates my analysis and interpretation of testimonies, allowing me to work with the non-verbal expression and emotions of the witness, and this is undeniably

Phenomenon of Czechoslovakia's 'Velvet' Revolution in Narratives by its 'Youngest Witnesses', *Sociológia*, 42, 6, (2010), pp. 671–690.

6 Zuzana Kiczková, *Women's Memory* (Bratislava: Iris 2006).

7 Denisa Nešťáková, "'Privilege' Space or Site of Temporary Safety? Women and Men in the Sereď Camp", in Natalia Aleksion and Hana Kubátová (eds), *Places, Spaces, and Voids in the Holocaust* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2021), pp. 315–321; Michala Lónčíková, "Coming back home? Anti-Jewish Violence in Slovakia after the Holocaust," in Benz, Wolfgang and Brigitte Mihok (eds), *Juden unerwünscht. Anfeindungen und Ausschreitungen nach dem Holocaust* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2016), pp. 191–212.

an advantage. In cases where the researcher is working with interviews and testimonies that he or she did not record, it is important (from a professional point of view) to carefully contextualize the recorded narrative, while respecting ethical principles and the obligations of the narrator. If at all possible, he or she should not only work with a transcript of the interview, but also try to hear or see the interview at least once. The filmed interview will provide her with a wealth of new information and impulses, which she will be able to use in her analysis and interpretation.

5 What have we learned as Holocaust researchers working with testimonies and oral history, that can help and inform contemporary collectors of testimonies and oral histories with, for example, witnesses and survivors of Russia's war against Ukraine? What are the moral and ethical challenges faced by scholars and collectors of testimonies when interviewing and working with witnesses of the ongoing war?

Researchers studying the Holocaust through testimonies and interviews with survivors have gradually gained insights into how to work with the oral history method in the creation of the interviews – thereby creating sources of ‘first-hand’ information to capture as fully as possible what the witness wanted to tell us, but also what he or she (consciously or subconsciously) left out or ‘edited out.’ There are countless manuals on how to work with this method. In my opinion, the most important thing for researchers trying to capture interviews with witnesses to the war in Ukraine or other wars is to develop a relationship with the narrator based on mutual trust, respect, and empathy. The interview needs to be a space in which both witnesses and researchers feel safe and as relaxed as possible. The researcher's intention must be clear to the witness, as should the manner and purpose of the researcher's work. The person being interviewed needs to know why the researcher wants to do the interview, what is the aim of the research, how the interview will be processed, archived, and made accessible. The researcher must first and foremost have the safety of the witness in mind, so that he is not exposed to any kind of danger because he has given an interview. The goal of science is to learn as much as possible, ideally

everything, about the phenomenon under study. However, with sensitive, painful, traumatic subjects, we need to draw the boundaries of what is bearable so as not to harm witnesses. And that is the real challenge: how to optimally identify and draw these boundaries? We must proceed sensitively and with understanding. In this case, I recommend an interviewee-led interview, where the witness has as much space as he or she wants and needs. He or she sets the boundaries, and the interviewer respects them.

Moreover, the researcher must supplement the recording and transcript of the interview with as many details as possible that will enhance it and allow for better analysis and interpretation of the interview in the future. In particular, this involves the preparation of the so-called interview report, in which the researcher describes in as much detail as possible the manner in which the interview was conducted, the location, the atmosphere during the interview, the interaction with the narrator during the interview, or how he/she got to know the narrator, and how they built up a relationship before the interview itself.

Finally, the audio/video interview and its transcript must be authorized by the interviewee, who must sign an informed consent where he/she has the exclusive right to determine how his/her person and personal data, as well as information about the people he/she mentions in the interview, will be protected. (For the Member States of the European Union, the basic starting point is Regulation 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data.) At the same time, the witness should also determine the possibilities of further processing of the interview, archiving, securing the archive, or the conditions of its possible release to the public.