

Open Forum

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Open Forum in the Dedicated Issue of East European Holocaust Studies on Oral History and the Holocaust

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Abstract: The events of the Holocaust are reflected in the numerous memoirs of rescued victims and witnesses of Nazi crimes. Collections of testimonies, memories and oral history on the Holocaust include thousands of early testimonies and life stories archived in for example the Yad Vashem and audio-visual collections initiated in later years such as the Institute for Visual History and Education USC Shoah Foundation, The Fortunoff Video Archives, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yahad-In Unum and others. In this open forum we show how the knowledge from collecting and using oral history and testimonies in Holocaust research can inform current collecting initiatives in relation to for example the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine.

Keywords: Holocaust; oral history; witness

1. Why is oral history important in Holocaust research?

Oral history holds a significant position in the study of the Holocaust. The benefit of oral testimonies lies in their provision of information not captured in formal documented sources. Often, German and Soviet documents do not manage to completely shed light on the Holocaust's execution. In contrast, the narratives of eyewitnesses serve as a vital resource, allowing for the meticulous documentation of such atrocities.

Through oral testimonies, researchers gain the ability to examine events through the lens of individual perspectives. Narratives from eyewitnesses enrich the

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conventional foundation of research, injecting a more human element into history, and steering away from its standardized interpretation. The personally lived past of individuals uncovers details absent in the conventional annals of history. Hence, oral history acts as a medium to equilibrate formal history with personal (human) narratives.

For investigators, a notable merit of video testimonies is the opportunity to visually observe the demeanor of the narrator and interpret it, which can often convey more than the narrative itself. The incorporation of oral sources into research alters the methodological frameworks for developing the foundational corpus of scholarly inquiries. Attention is directed towards the individual, encapsulating their unique, and frequently, traumatic journey.

Consequently, the essence of oral history compilations underscores their significant potential for Holocaust research, where they frequently contain unique information that is absent in other official records.

2. How do you work with oral history, testimonies, or stories of survivors in your research?

Most of my research is based on oral sources. Among the sources of oral collections I have used, two of the largest global institutions – the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education (USA) and Yahad-In Unum (France)¹ – are particularly noteworthy. I have had the opportunity to study the Shoah Foundation's resources thanks to scholarship programs of the German-Ukrainian Commission of Historians (DUHK, Deutsch Ukrainische Historikerkommission) in Berlin in 2017,² a scholarship from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington in 2022, and, as a nonresidential scholar, with the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education over the course of 2023–2024.

¹ For the potential of these two institutions' oral sources for Holocaust research, see the article: R. Mykhalchuk "Holocaust oral history sources in the educational and academic discourse (based on the sources of the Shoah Foundation of the University of Southern California and Yahad-In Unum in France)" *International multidisciplinary scientific and practical Internet conference "Innovative projects and paradigms of international education"* (Tbilisi and Kyiv, February 28 – March 1, 2023). pp. 118–121.

² Information about the DUHK research project. URL: <https://www.duhk.org/uk/stipendiji/minulorichni-stipendiati/d-r-roman-mikhalchuk/proekt>; Research article resulting from the project: R. Mykhalchuk, "Forced labor in the Reich as salvation (the survival story of Maria Berzon from Rivne)", *Historians*, 17 Aug. 2017, URL: <http://www.historians.in.ua/index.php/en/avtorska-kolonka/2260-roman-mikhalchukprimusova-pratsya-v-rajkhu-yak-poryatunok-istoriya-vizhivannya-rivnenskojievrejki-mariji-berzon>.

I researched Yahad-In Unum's sources thanks to scholarship programs at the institution in 2018 and 2022. The findings of my study of this video collection have been published in a special article.³

The Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture (MFJC) also supported my Holocaust research projects in Ukraine using oral sources in 2022 and 2023.⁴

Researching the Holocaust in Mizoch, in 2016, I created my own collection of oral sources, recording about 30 interviews with local non-Jewish residents about World War II and the Holocaust. The results of this oral history project are outlined in a separate article.⁵ Additionally, two sources from the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, which relate to the Holocaust in Mizoch, have been published. These are the stories of the Righteous Among the Nations, Maria Slobodyuk (Mosychuk),⁶ and the Jew Isaac Rosenblatt,⁷ which were recorded by the Shoah team in 1997.

In the context of using oral historical sources in the study of Mizoch, the Ukrainian-German project Memory Network⁸ should be mentioned. One of the results of my involvement in the project was the publication of a popular science publication about the life and death of the Jewish community in Mizoch.⁹ The publication used oral sources from many archives. In particular, sources from the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education were of great

3 The research findings are presented in the article: R. Mykhalchuk, "Holocaust oral history sources in the Yahad-In Unum archive collection (based on general district Volhynia-Podolia materials)", *Colloquia Humanistica*, 2023, no. 12, pp. 1–19.

4 Thanks to the MFJC grant programs in 2022 and 2023, the following articles were published: R. Mykhalchuk "The situation of Jews in the Mizoch ghetto", *Zaporizhzhia Historical Review*, Zaporizhzhia: ZNU, 2022, issue 6 (58), pp. 209–229; R. Shliakhtych and R. Mykhalchuk, "Local Police and the Holocaust in the General District 'Dnipropetrovsk' (Evidence from the districts of Kryvyi Rih and Stalindorf)", *Intermarum: History, Politics, Culture*, 2022, issue 11, pp. 83–102; R. Mykhalchuk and P. Dolhanov, "'Jew, we will turn you in, we need your clothes': the robbery of Mizoch Jews during the Holocaust", *Ukraine Moderna*, 2023, no. 34, pp. 141–196; R. Mykhalchuk, "The Jewish Community of Mizoch in 1939–1941", *Intermarum: History, Politics, Culture*, 2023, issue 13, pp. 215–219.

5 R. Mykhalchuk, "New Testimonies about the Holocaust in Mizoch (based on the oral history project in July–August 2016)", *Current problems of domestic and world history: academic proceedings of Rivne State Humanitarian University*, 2017, issue 29, pp. 265–274.

6 Video testimony of the Righteous Among the Nations, Maria Mosychuk as a source for studying the Catastrophe and local history/Roman Mykhalchuk. *Holocaust and Modernity*. Studies in Ukraine and the World, no. 2 (10), (Kyiv: Zovnishtorhvydav Ukrayiny Publishers, 2011), pp. 97–165.

7 Testimony of Isaac Rosenblatt as a source for studying the Holocaust and local history/Roman Mykhalchuk *Problems of Holocaust history: the Ukrainian dimension* (Dnipro: Tkuma Institute; Lira LTD, 2023) issue 15.

8 For more information about the project, see URL: <https://netzwerk-erinnerung.de/uk/>.

9 R. Mykhalchuk, *Mizoch: the life and death of the Jewish community* (Kyiv: Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies, 2023).

importance, which the Memory Network team specifically transcribed for the study with translations into Ukrainian from various languages. These transcripts also formed the groundwork for my articles about the rescue of Mizoch Jews during the Holocaust,¹⁰ and the trauma of the Holocaust as experienced by Jews there.¹¹

Among my other significant publications where oral history sources were used, I should mention research into the role of the civilian population in the Nazi Holocaust plans in the General District “Volhynia-Podolia” (based on Yahad-In Unum materials),¹² into the role of Jewish property in the dynamics of the Holocaust in the General District “Volhynia-Podolia,”¹³ into the genocide of Western Volhynian Jews using the example of the town of Mizoch,¹⁴ as well as into the 1942 uprising in the Mizoch ghetto.¹⁵ These publications stand out in that they rely not only on oral sources from the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, and from Yahad-In Unum, but also rest on my own collection of oral testimonies as well as sources from Yad Vashem.

3. What collections of oral history exist in your region and/or country, and how are they used by Holocaust researchers in your country?

The endeavors of the Ukrainian Oral History Association,¹⁶ which releases thematic compilations derived from conference outcomes, significantly advance the scholarship

10 R. Mykhalchuk, “Methods of rescuing Mizoch Jews during the Holocaust”, *Proceedings of the National University Ostroh Academy*. Series: Historical studies, Ostroh, 2023, issue 34, pp. 32–36.

11 R. Mykhalchuk, “The Trauma of the Holocaust in the Testimonies of Victims”, *Current Problems of Domestic and World History: Collection of research works*, Rivne State Humanities University, issue 34 (Rivne: RSHU, 2022), pp. 62–68. Also see the EHRI Blog: R. Mykhalchuk. “The Town of Mizoch on the Map of the Holocaust”, EHRI Document Blog. URL: <https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2023/10/18/mizoch/>.

12 R. Mykhalchuk, “‘Small death jobs’: the role of forced civilian persons in the Nazi plans of the Holocaust in the General District of Volyn-Podillia (on the materials of Yahad-In Unum)”, *East European Historical Bulletin*. (Drohobych: Publishing House «Helvetica», 2020), issue 15, pp. 157–165.

13 R. Mykhalchuk, “The Role of Jewish Property in the Dynamics of the Holocaust in Volyn-Podillia General District: The focus of the local non-Jewish population”, *Holocaust Studies: A Ukrainian Focus* (English Version), (Dnipro: “Tkuma” Institute; PE “Lira LTD”, 2022), vol. 13, pp. 33–78.

14 R. Mykhalchuk “Genocide of the Jews of Western Volyn on the example of the town of Mizoch in 1942”, *Intermarum: history, politics, culture*, 2022, issue 11, p. 67–82;

15 R. Mykhalchuk, “I Wanted Revenge for the Shed Innocent Jewish Blood: The resistance of Mizoch Jews during the Holocaust.” *Eminak*. 2022, no. 4 (40), pp. 236–253.

16 To learn more about the activities of the UAOH, visit <https://oralhistory.com.ua/>.

on the Holocaust within Ukraine. Featured among the scholars who have contributed to the discourse on the Holocaust in these volumes are Albert Venher,¹⁷ Gelinada Grinchenko,¹⁸ and Andriy Usach.¹⁹ Moreover, a myriad of oral history initiatives have been carried out and continue to be conducted across Ukraine by a diverse array of entities (including the “Unheard” projects by the Memorial Museum of Totalitarian Regimes Topography of Terror; oral history ventures by the NGO “After Silence”; and the “Voices” project by the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center, among others). Specifically, Petro Dolhanov, drawing from the “Voices” project (2020–2021), authored an article that delves into the testimonies of Ukrainian eyewitnesses to the Holocaust from the regions of Western Volhynia.²⁰

Presently, the historiography of the Holocaust in Ukraine is undergoing a process of active integration into the international academic sphere, thereby making extensive use of resources from some of the world’s foremost oral history repositories – namely, the collections housed by the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, and Yahad-In Unum. These two oral history archives serve complementary roles, enriching the understanding of the Holocaust by offering varied perspectives (from non-Jewish witnesses, and Jewish victims). The past five years have witnessed the most substantial advancements in research drawing upon these oral history collections. In this period, scholars such as Volodymyr Zilinskyi,²¹ Roman Shlyakhtych, Roman

17 A. Venher, “Peripheral Story Lines in Thematic Interviews: Based on the memories of residents of the former Stalindorf district”, *Oral History of the (un)overcome past: event – narrative – interpretation*: Proceedings of the international research conference, Odesa, 8-11 October 2015, edited by G. Grinchenko, Kharkiv, 2016, pp. 83–91; A. Venher and O. Kakovkina, “Holocaust in the Memories of Non-Jews (based on the materials of the Stalindorf district of Dnipropetrovsk region)”, *Problems of Holocaust history: Academic journal*, no. 7, Dnipro: Tkuma Institute; Lira LTD, 2015, pp. 6–16.

18 G. Grinchenko, “Oral Histories of the Holocaust in Ukraine and Peculiarities of their Interpretations”, *Oral History of the (Un)Overcome Past: Event – narrative – interpretation*, Proceedings of the international research conference, Odesa, 8-11 October 2015, edited by G. Grinchenko, Kharkiv, 2016, pp. 83–91.

19 A. Usach, “‘It Wasn’t the Germans ...’: Local perpetrators of the Holocaust in non-Jewish oral historical testimonies”, *Listen, Hear, Understand: Oral history of Ukraine in the 20th–21st centuries: collection of research works*, under the scientific editorship of Doctor of Historical Sciences G. Grinchenko (Kyiv: ART BOOK LLC, 2021), pp. 143–161.

20 P. Dolhanov, “‘The Other/Alien’: The image of Jews in the memories of Ukrainian neighbors about World War II”, *Problems of Holocaust History: The Ukrainian dimension* (Dnipro: Tkuma Institute; Lira LTD, 2022) issue 14, pp. 41–57.

21 V. Zilinskyi, “They were Killed on the Spot: The extermination of Jews during Nazi occupation in the territory of Lviv Region”, *Lviv University Bulletin, Historical Series*, 2019, pp. 340–360.

Mykhalchuk,²² Andriy Khoptyar,²³ and Yurii Kaparulin²⁴ have published significant works. These researchers have relied heavily on the oral testimony source material provided by Yahad-In Unum, conducting in-depth analyses of the Holocaust across various Ukrainian locales.

In their scholarly explorations of the Holocaust's gender aspects, researchers Marta Havryshko and Nataliya Ivchuk extensively draw upon the resources of the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education.

4. What academic and ethical challenges do Holocaust researchers face when working with oral histories, testimonies, and other stories of those who survived the Holocaust?

Oral history testimonies possess significant scholarly potential for Holocaust research. However, it's essential to remember that these are subjective sources. During analysis/research, they require proper 'triangulation' (comparison with other types of sources).

Jewish and non-Jewish perspectives in oral stories about the same events differ. Specifically, Holocaust victims' testimonies are marked by greater emotional intensity compared to the accounts of witnesses from the non-Jewish population, which is understandable given their direct, tragic genocidal experience. Researchers must consider this, as the historical reliability of such sources may be compromised by the psychological trauma of the narrators.

Witness accounts provide not so much information about the events as about the role witnesses played in them. Consciously or unconsciously, respondents choose their stance on the events they describe. Among non-Jewish witnesses, there was sometimes a desire to demonstrate their exceptional significance in the described events, exaggerating or claiming a central role in assisting and rescuing Jews, for

²² R. Shliakhtych, "The Holocaust in Rural Areas of Dnipropetrovsk Region (based on recorded eyewitness testimony from the Yahad-In Unum archives)", *Roxolania Historica*. 2019. vol. 2 (17), 188–198; R. Mykhalchuk, "Holocaust Oral History Sources in the Yahad-In Unum Archive Collection (based on general district Volhynia-Podolia materials)", *Colloquia Humanistica*, 2023, no. 12, pp. 1–19.

²³ A. Khoptyar, "Holocaust in the Kamyanets-Podilsky Region: Chronology, mechanisms, methods of extermination of the Jewish population (July 1941 – January 1943)". *Ukrainian Historical Journal*, 2020, no. 3, pp. 90–103.

²⁴ Y. Kaparulin, "The Holocaust in Southern Ukraine: The Response of Surviving Jews of Kalinindorf District after the German Occupation" *Colloquia Humanistica*, 2020, 9, pp. 153–180.

example, or, conversely, distancing themselves from the horrific events, denying their own participation and that of their relatives and acquaintances in the Holocaust. They seemed to say: “it wasn’t us,” “we were not involved,” “we didn’t do this,” “if someone did it – it was others.” Also, it should be remembered that non-Jewish witnesses were usually children at the time of the described events. Therefore, they could narrate not only their own individual experience of what they saw, but also the stories they heard from parents, relatives, friends, etc., as well as transmit stereotypes prevalent in their community. Thus, careful analysis and thorough reading of such testimonies can form the basis for different conclusions than the events as related by the witnesses.

Furthermore, the ethics involved in oral history projects play a significant role in the academic research process of the researcher. Adhering to these ethical standards is essential for researchers, organizations, and associations engaged in oral history, as they are responsible for ensuring that testimonies are utilized within ethical and legal parameters. Such adherence facilitates the protection of the personal data of narrators. Narrators must be informed about the purpose for which their testimonies are being collected.

5. What do we learn by working with testimonies and oral history as Holocaust researchers, which can help and inform modern collectors of testimonies and oral histories, for example, witnesses of crimes and those who survived during the war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine? What moral and ethical challenges do researchers and collectors of testimonies face while conducting interviews and dealing with witnesses of the ongoing war?

The application of oral history narratives is exceedingly pertinent for examining traumatic events of the Twentieth Century, notably World War II, the Holocaust, and the scrutiny of the totalitarian practices of National Socialism, among others. Currently, the testimonies of Ukrainian victims of the Russian–Ukrainian war,

particularly after the full-scale invasion in 2022 by Russian forces in Ukraine, are of utmost relevance.

Given the ongoing full-scale war by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, which the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine has designated as a genocide of the Ukrainian people,²⁵ the history of the Holocaust, as an exemplar of genocide, holds particular significance in the present circumstances. The Holocaust's lessons offer a methodological framework for comprehending the crimes committed against Ukrainians. Evidently, in the process of condemning Russian perpetrators, a comprehensive source base for accusation is indispensable. Here, a diverse array of sources, including both official documents and oral testimonies, is crucial. Two years after the Russian Federation's full-scale offensive in Ukraine, an adequate documentary foundation was established.

It is important to recognize that the oral history organization Yahad-In Unum, under the leadership of Patrick Desbois, which possesses expertise in recording Nazi atrocities in Eastern Europe, embarked on an oral history initiative to document the crimes committed by Russian forces in Ukraine following the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion. This project aims at assembling a repository of oral testimonies concerning contemporary crimes and acts of violence.

The endeavor of generating oral testimonies and examining the Russian–Ukrainian conflict is endorsed by academic entities, including the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM, Vienna, Austria). This initiative has facilitated support for numerous Ukrainian scholars in their investigative pursuits. My own project, titled “Survive and win: the Russian–Ukrainian war of 2022,” endorsed by the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (IWM and HURI) during the summer of 2022, focused on chronicling the offenses perpetrated by Russian invaders in Ukraine through the lens of oral history.²⁶ In the course of this oral history project, I successfully conducted over 40 video interviews with internally displaced persons (IDPs) migrating from the Eastern, Central, and Southern regions of Ukraine to the Rivne region. Moreover, I gathered insights from volunteers in the Rivne region who addressed the challenges faced by displaced persons amidst the conflict.²⁷

Some have argued that it might be too soon now to conduct interviews with witnesses and victims of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict, and that such

25 Draft Resolution on the Statement of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine *On Genocide Being Committed by the Russian Federation in Ukraine*. Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. URL: <https://itd.rada.gov.ua/billinfo/Bills/Card/39411>.

26 For more information about the Documenting Ukraine project, see: R. Mykhalchuk. “Survive and Win: The Russian–Ukrainian war of 2022”, URL: <https://www.iwm.at/documenting-ukraine/grantees/roman-mykhalchuk>.

27 The implementation of the project was covered by Rivne television. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xkts-ZEfew8&t=62s>.

interviews could breach ethical guidelines, as narrators of tragic occurrences are compelled to revisit their anguish. Hence, it is imperative to handle the recording of such dialogs with utmost sensitivity. A paramount principle that researchers must consistently uphold during their interview practices is the mantra – do no harm. Should witnesses struggle to discuss traumatic events, they must not be coerced into continuing; rather, it is advisable to divert the conversation to other, ‘distracting’ neutral subjects, or to terminate the interview entirely. Conversely, there are instances where witnesses choose to speak about their traumatic experiences because they have a desire to share the ordeal they have undergone. For such individuals, articulating their story is crucial, and some express feeling a sense of psychological relief after disclosing their personal trials to someone else, as evidenced by their emotional reactions (tears)²⁸ during the interviews.

The experience of the researcher who conducts the interviews represents another aspect of this endeavor. Increasingly, the interplay between mental well-being and academic inquiry is being scrutinized. This subject is notably discussed in a recent publication by Omer Bartov.²⁹ Academics share insights into how involvement in oral history initiatives impacts their psychological and emotional well-being. Marta Havryshko, for instance, addresses the potential challenges and risks awaiting scholars in this domain. Being emotionally braced for the “challenging” narratives that might emerge during interviews is essential.³⁰

Thus, the reciprocal process of interviewing/narrating between the researcher and the witness of violence is fraught with challenges encountered by both parties. Consequently, the quest for vital information should be conducted with care and necessitates adequate preparatory measures.

²⁸ Interview with Olena Biryukova, born in 1958, of 9 June 2022. *Archive of Roman Mykhalchuk*.

²⁹ O. Bartov, “‘You need resilience’: How a genocide scholar faces history’s darkest moments”, *High Culture*, 22 December 2023, URL: <https://bigthink.com/high-culture/holocaust-mental-health/?fbclid=IwAR05IUdtn9NveD5Q5PPrz7gZKyFX7MY8CyyA8kb1CusV2QIjOnBPKOTjhG0>.

³⁰ M. Havryshko, “Vulnerability, Guilt, and Shame: Doing oral history of ethnic violence during World War II in the Eastern Galicia”. *Rocznik Antropologii Historii*, 2020, vol. X, (13), pp. 121–150.