

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: Oral history constitutes one of the pivotal source categories through which we investigate the Holocaust. The more diverse the source base, the more accurately we can reconstruct the events that transpired. Initially, the study of Holocaust history heavily relied on German documents – essentially, viewing the events through the lens of sources produced by the perpetrators. These sources presented the perspective of the Holocaust’s orchestrators and executors.

Keywords: Holocaust testimonies; survival strategies; Holocaust perpetrators

1. Why is oral history important in Holocaust research?

Oral history constitutes one of the pivotal source categories through which we investigate the Holocaust. The more diverse the source base, the more accurately we can reconstruct the events that transpired. Initially, the study of Holocaust history heavily relied on German documents – essentially, viewing the events through the lens of sources produced by the perpetrators. These sources presented the perspective of the Holocaust’s orchestrators and executors. For instance, according to their portrayal, Jews did not offer resistance but instead submitted passively to their fate; the Judenrats were depicted as compliantly facilitating the Holocaust; the German bureaucratic apparatus for executing mass murder was portrayed as exceptionally efficient, ostensibly leaving negligible scope for local discretion

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(virtually everyone was portrayed as becoming absolute captives to the genocidal policies of a totalitarian state, with no recourse for action). Many of these perceptions have been partially or wholly debunked through the incorporation of additional source groups that reflect the viewpoints of a broader array of communities. Notably, oral history effected a significant paradigm shift in Holocaust studies during the 1990s and 2000s. Extensive projects that have documented the testimonies of Holocaust survivors have significantly enhanced our understanding of their survival strategies and the complex array of decisions faced in situations of “Choiceless choice.” The collection of oral historical testimonies has also enabled historians to explore novel research areas, such as the emotional experiences of Jews, and their perceptions of time and space during the Holocaust. This has facilitated a more nuanced historiography of the Holocaust that better accounts for Jewish agency. Additionally, these sources have illuminated the conduct of “neighbors” under the conditions of the Holocaust – namely, the local populations and organizations in occupied Eastern Europe. Oral history has proven particularly invaluable for elucidating the dynamics of both individual and collective memory, and their interrelation.

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

In my research on the Holocaust within the region of Western Volhynia, I draw upon testimonies from both Jewish survivors and the local non-Jewish populace. These testimonies are part of a diverse array of sources that includes investigative files from the SBU archives, records of the occupation administrations (both municipal and district) preserved in regional and central state archives, materials from German archives, and ego-documents, among others. Often, it is the eyewitness testimonies that afford deeper insight into the survival mechanisms of individuals following the dissolution of most ghettos. They also considerably enrich our understanding of the micro-historical aspects of the Holocaust. Specifically, through testimonies, it becomes possible to discern the motivations behind the actions of both Jews and the non-Jewish population, and the specific circumstances surrounding various incidents. On numerous occasions, testimonies have facilitated the determination of the approximate dates of ghettos’ establishment and liquidation in the absence of archival records. At times, by juxtaposing various testimonies, it has been feasible to reveal discrepancies between the dates of events as recorded in archival documents, and their actual occurrence. This discrepancy often arose due to the substandard investigation of Nazi crimes by Soviet investigative

bodies in the post-war era, or because the documents contained errors for other reasons. Consequently, I consistently employ a comparative analysis of different groups of sources to more precisely ascertain specific dates and facts. In this regard, oral historical sources and archival documents warrant an equal degree of scrutiny from researchers: both necessitate critical examination and corroboration against additional sources. Based on my own research experience, factual inaccuracies in archival documents are encountered just as frequently as in oral historical sources.

Simultaneously, I also utilize testimonies to capture the subjective perspectives of various individuals of the events that unfolded. This approach enables us to gain at least a partial understanding of their emotions (such as fear, love, envy, or greed), underlying motives for their actions, and the stereotypes and prejudices that influenced both their worldviews and behaviors.

One of my most recent publications, focusing on the history of the Holocaust in Ostrozhec (a small village in the Rivne region, situated in historical Western Volhynia), was composed almost exclusively through engagement with the testimonies of Jews and Ukrainians about those events.¹ Given the scarcity of surviving documents pertaining to the Holocaust in this small locality, without these testimonies, we would have remained largely ignorant of its occurrence. This exemplifies the critical role that oral historical sources play in reconstructing historical events that are otherwise undocumented.

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

In addition to the globally recognized oral history collections such as the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, the Fortunoff Archive, the Yad Vashem collection of testimonies, Toby Herr Oral History Archive and others, local oral history archives significantly contribute to Holocaust research in Ukraine. I would like to emphasize the importance of two archives, in particular, to my work – the *Voices* project archive at the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center,² and the still modest-sized archive of

1 Native of Ostrozhec: Life and Demise of the Jewish Community/Petro Dolhanov. Kyiv: Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies, 2023. URL: https://www.holocaust.kiev.ua/Files/zah_pam/ostoroj_2023.pdf.

2 Voices. Oral Accounts of the Holocaust and World War II in Ukraine (collection of BYHMC). URL: <https://babynyar.org/ua/voices>.

testimonies from the NGO After Silence.³ These archives are valuable for their inclusion of a greater number of accounts from the non-Jewish (mainly Ukrainian) population. Historically, these narratives received less focus within the context of Holocaust studies, predominantly documenting the experiences of those within the “rescuers” community, i.e., individuals who assisted Jews in surviving the Holocaust through various means. Meanwhile, the perspectives of the broader local, especially Ukrainian, population and their views of the Holocaust events, were largely overlooked by oral history initiatives. Currently, the above mentioned archival collections are instrumental to my research on the Holocaust in western Volhynia.

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?

The challenges faced are considerable. I aim to succinctly outline five key challenges that I frequently encounter. The first challenge involves critically reflecting on and analyzing eyewitness testimonies. It is common for both Jewish and non-Jewish witnesses of Holocaust events to echo numerous prejudices, stereotypes, and so-called “folkloric stories”⁴ in their accounts. Among these, for instance, are tales about the earth “moving” for days after the burial of Jews in mass graves. Such accounts are encountered across various regions of Ukraine, seemingly attempting to add dramatic emphasis to narratives about profoundly traumatic and dramatic historical moments. These stories are largely considered to be unrealistic for a variety of reasons.⁵ Similarly, survivor communities of Jews also propagate their

³ The archive of the NGO After Silence is not yet available online. Colleagues from the organization, Andriy Usach and Anna Yatsenko, have been recording testimonies of eyewitnesses across Ukraine for several years. They also digitize family photographs and documents, which are important sources of information about events of World War II in Ukraine. Link to the website of the NGO After Silence: <https://aftersilence.co/>.

⁴ The concept of “folkloric story” is often used by my colleagues and myself in the Memory Network project (URL: <https://netzwerk-erinnerung.de/uk/>) while we work with eyewitness testimonies. This term refers to popular local narratives about Holocaust events that sound improbable and can be a variety of a “local legend” created by either the local population or surviving Jews.

⁵ It is extremely difficult to imagine a situation where a person covered with soil and the weight of other bodies continued to move for several days, causing some effects of soil movement on the surface. Of course, there were cases when surviving Jews could escape from the execution pits. However, it seems that all such stories relate to the first night after the executions. Escaping from the

own “folkloric stories.” A frequent narrative found in testimonies involves “blood testing for Aryan origin.” Individuals who opted to conceal their identities occasionally recount attempts to unveil their Jewish heritage through blood tests. Yet, it appears that German archives have yet to provide evidence of such practices being employed by the Nazi regime. Given that such narratives often become integrated into a person’s recollection, disentangling these layers is not always straightforward.

The second challenge pertains to the impact of collective memory and memory politics on individuals’ recollections. Testimonies from people who resided in the USSR territories are often laden with Soviet propaganda clichés and generalizations about “fascists,” affecting both Jewish and non-Jewish populations alike. This typically oversimplifies and somewhat distorts our comprehension of the Holocaust perpetrators’ motives. Conversely, the accounts of Jewish survivor community members who resettled in the West are also influenced by certain collective imaginations. For example, in adopting Western societal views of the USSR, they frequently refer to the Soviet Union as “Russia” and Red Army servicemen as “Russians.” These perspectives are sometimes unreflectively echoed in Holocaust historiography. A critical examination of the language used in such testimonies during research is crucial for decolonizing narratives about Eastern European history. The effect of prevalent narratives within surviving Jewish communities on individual memories warrants further investigation. Comparing different renditions of a single individual’s memories, I have occasionally discovered that mentions of Czech and Polish rescuers (a reflection of a stereotypical generalization prevalent in collective narratives) in Volhynia surfaced in much later memory iterations. Conversely, early post-war testimonies or recollections might not mention aid from Czechs at all, and the conduct of Ukrainian neighbors was portrayed in a more problematic and ambiguous light than in subsequent accounts, when a collective inclination to depict Ukrainian neighbors as predominantly harmful to Jews had emerged.

The third challenge, arising from the previous one, is the scarcity of recollections from the local non-Jewish populace. Specifically, juxtaposing the local population’s perspective with the memories of Jewish survivors could help soften stereotypes and generalizations that might unintentionally bias a historian’s viewpoint (as the undue reliance on German documents previously influenced Holocaust historiography’s trajectory in the latter half of the 20th century). Yet, the majority of global oral history projects concerning the Holocaust have paid minimal attention to capturing the

execution pits in this case was only possible for those who ended up their last (i.e., if the execution lasted throughout the day, usually only those who were executed closer to the evening could escape). For instance, this is pointed out by Martin Dean in his *Investigating Babyn Yar: Shadows from the Valley of Death* (Lanham; Boulder; New York; London: Lexington Books, 2023), p. 163.

testimonies of the non-Jewish population. Yahad-In Unum's oral history recordings represent the sole international initiative that has concentrated on this aspect. However, the interview methodology employed in this project presents several flaws. Witnesses were not permitted to narrate their life stories in an open, narrative interview format. They were not encouraged to elaborate on their experiences in chronological order akin to the Shoah Foundation's approach. Consequently, the resulting testimonies are highly fragmented and somewhat detached from the holistic memory context, focusing on execution sites and singular names of victims and grave diggers (roles that the Nazi occupational authorities enforced upon the local populace). While this information is invaluable, it only partially addresses the absence of non-Jewish population memories. The perspectives of this group can be somewhat accessed through the documents of the Extraordinary State Commission (ESC) for the investigation of German-fascist invaders' atrocities and post-war criminal investigative cases. However, these documents represent not the direct speech of individuals, but rather summarized memories articulated in bureaucratic language. They cannot substitute for a comprehensive interview with an individual, as facilitated by the Shoah Foundation or another oral history projects.

The fourth challenge relates to the nature of memories of traumatic events. Individuals who have endured a harrowing past often resist revisiting those experiences, and when they do, their narratives are frequently incomplete. This is why I generally prefer not to rely solely on testimony transcripts (which have become an integral component of oral history projects) but to view the recorded memories in their entirety. Only by hearing a person's voice and observing their facial expressions and gestures can you identify moments of unspoken stories or inconsistencies (at times, the body language may contradict the verbal account). Thus, researchers of Holocaust history need to function not merely as historians but also as psychologists, capable of interpreting non-verbal cues at a basic level.

Untold stories result not only from trauma but also from self-censorship. This approach is often adopted by members of the non-Jewish community when discussing local perpetrators. There exists a persistent tendency to deny local perpetrators' complicity in crimes. The term "local" can be interpreted in vastly different manners, ranging from a national scale (e.g., denying Ukrainians' involvement in killings) to a local level (e.g., attempting to categorize police officers as originating from adjacent districts or villages, and dismissing the notion that perpetrators included fellow villagers). In such instances, the skill of interviewers is paramount. Often, a single pertinent follow-up question, such as "what language did the police speak?" can clarify whether they were "Poles" or "Ukrainians" (when an individual is reluctant to discuss the matter openly).

Lastly, another challenge I would highlight is the historian's ability to identify and differentiate between the presence or absence of correlations in an individual's

worldview (encompassing values, beliefs, stereotypes, prejudices, etc.) and their conduct. Anti-Semitic sentiments have long been regarded in Holocaust historiography as a primary factor shaping local social dynamics during the Holocaust, influencing the non-Jewish population's attitudes towards Jews. In engaging with testimonies from Ukrainian eyewitnesses, I have become increasingly convinced that anti-Semitic prejudices and stereotypes are, to some extent, intrinsic to the majority of representatives from Christian communities. Nonetheless, the notion that this significantly influenced the Christian (particularly Ukrainian) population's behavior towards Jews during the Holocaust remains unconvincing to me. This skepticism stems from the observation that many individuals who assisted Jews also harbored anti-Semitic beliefs and stereotypes. In some cases, even a deliberate ideological alignment with radical nationalist ideologies, characterized by inherent antisemitism, did not deter individuals from aiding their Jewish neighbors. Therefore, the relationship between traditional anti-Semitic prejudices, ideologically motivated antisemitism, and individuals' actions at the micro-level presents a complex issue that remains underexplored. Hopefully oral history sources may offer deeper insights into this dilemma in the foreseeable future.

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?

Everyone engaged in oral history today benefits from the established methodologies developed in Holocaust studies. It is unnecessary to “reinvent the wheel.” Instead, existing research methods can be utilized. Oral history's uniqueness lies in the fact that sources are not simply inherited in the form in which they have been preserved. Researchers themselves influence the character of the source. The choice of

interviewing methodology directly impacts the outcome. However, the end result is not the sole consideration. The psychological and physical well-being of individuals assisting in creating an essential source is of paramount importance. Hence, all these factors must be carefully balanced, adhering to the well-established principle of “do no harm.” In contemporary oral history methodology, numerous ethical guidelines have been formulated, allowing for the adoption of proven approaches.