



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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1. Why is oral history important in Holocaust research?

Reflecting on the role of oral history in Holocaust studies inevitably highlights the multifaceted utility of oral history, which manifests in two distinct dimensions. The first dimension emphasizes the utilization of oral history as a pivotal tool for generating a foundational source base, wherein the researcher actively crafts the questionnaire and conducts the interview, thereby participating as a co-creator of the source material. The second dimension involves the researcher engaging with sources produced by others (including paper records, audio recordings, and video footage), over which they exert no control regarding the structuring or content of these sources. Initially, in the 1990s and early 2000s, Ukrainian Holocaust researchers predominantly adopted the first approach to oral history, but over time, as the number of witnesses dwindled and collections of oral testimonies became more readily available, historians transitioned from on-the-ground “field” research to more conventional office-based analysis, utilizing materials compiled by their forerunners.

For me, the most captivating approach to oral historical research is the first variant, where direct interaction allows for the posing of questions and the clarification of specific details. Fieldwork in oral history has been instrumental in Holocaust research, standing on equal footing with traditional documentary sources. The firsthand accounts of victims and witnesses have been invaluable for

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piecing together narratives absent from documentary evidence, enabling the voices of thousands from an entire era to be heard and drawing increased public attention to the nuanced understanding of the Holocaust tragedy.

Discussing the practical significance of oral history, its value lies in bridging gaps in the historical record at individual, local, and national levels. A crucial aspect of working with witnesses involves enriching the historical landscape with their narratives, as they recount events at crime scenes and sometimes identify burial sites of Holocaust victims, residences of the victims, and so forth. Furthermore, a significant resource potential of oral history lies in identifying the names of victims, perpetrators, and those who harbored Jews, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive and personalized account of history.

2. How have you been working with oral history, testimonies, or survivor stories in your own research?

From my second year at university in 2004, I embarked on collecting testimonies from residents of the former Stalindorf Jewish national district in the Dnipropetrovsk Region. I dedicated an entire summer to traversing villages and documenting the recollections of those who had lived in the area during the German occupation and before. Thus, leveraging oral testimonies, I began piecing together the district's life and the destinies of its inhabitants during the Second World War, and only subsequently did I incorporate archival materials. Upon delving into archival records, I assessed the potential of archival documents versus oral sources in reconstructing the past. It became apparent that archives offered limited information, predominantly statistical in nature. Hence, oral history presented far greater opportunities for understanding than archival research. In my studies, archival materials played a supporting role, aiding in the verification of specific dates.

3. Which oral history collections exist in your region or country, and how have they been used in research by Holocaust scholars in your country?

The existence of oral history collections is quite fascinating. It is worth noting that beyond the centralized, large-scale initiatives, such as the Spielberg Foundation or the Patrick Desbois Foundation, substantial efforts have been made through local

initiatives. Many of these mini-collections reside in the private archives of ethnographers, historians, and small museums. For instance, Klavdiya Mishkova, a teacher from Krasino village (formerly a Jewish settlement) in the Kryvyi Rih District of the Dnipropetrovsk Region, alongside her students, amassed dozens of Holocaust witness accounts over many years, reconstructing victims' names through these memories. There are numerous such dedicated individuals. A primary concern with these collections is their potential loss as they become misplaced, their collectors pass away, and their work, stored in home archives, disappears with them. Thus, a significant challenge for contemporary researchers is to centralize the efforts of oral historians. I, too, was troubled by the prospect of my collected testimonies' survival, recognizing the unreliability of maintaining them in my personal archive. Throughout my numerous relocations, some collected materials were unfortunately lost. This concern ultimately led me to publish the collection "Stalindorf District: Documents and Materials,"¹ dedicating a section to the materials I had gathered.

In the early 2000s, the Holocaust Study Center initiated several oral history expeditions to Crimea and western Ukraine, capturing dozens of testimonies regarding Jewish life prior to the war and during the Nazi occupation. I participated in these expeditions as well.

The most recent major initiative in Ukraine for gathering oral testimonies was the "Voices" project by the Babyn Yar Memorial Center, spearheaded by Gelinada Grinchenko. This project succeeded in collecting hundreds of testimonies, which were meticulously cataloged and transliterated. I acted as the regional coordinator for this project in the Dnipropetrovsk Region.

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?

Ethical considerations are a universal challenge for anyone who has recorded testimonies from Holocaust victims and others. Reflecting on this, I recognize that researchers grapple with ethical dilemmas, while narrators face self-censorship, both of which significantly shape the interview process. For me, ethics entail refraining from posing questions that elicit discomfort or revulsion, specifically

¹ Albert Venger, ed. "Stalindorfs'kyi Raion: Dokumenty i Materialy, Kyiv: Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Charity" Eastern European Holocaust Studies (2021), 340. <https://doi.org/10.1515/eehs-2022-0018>.

questions that intrude into personal spheres the narrator is not prepared to share with an outsider. Furthermore, every interview that revisits the narrator's tragic past compels them to relive and, consequently, re-experience the associated stress.

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 from the What are the moral and ethical challenges faced by scholars and collectors of testimonies when interviewing and working with witnesses of the ongoing war?

When discussing aids for contemporary researchers documenting current war events, ethics are paramount! The pursuit of remarkable, often tragic, stories is common. Regrettably, narrators are sometimes exploited for these narratives. This issue is particularly acute when children, already bearing trauma, are interviewed, potentially inflicting further distress due to inexperienced interviewers. This presents a significant challenge for the documentation field, which it has yet to fully address. Historians who previously recorded Holocaust memories are now documenting Russian crimes in Ukraine and gathering testimonies from soldiers, victims, and witnesses. Last year, my wife and I undertook a project titled "Voices: The Experience of Displaced Persons in the Frontline City of Dnipro," interviewing individuals from Mariupol and other cities subjected to Russian bombardment. I personally find that interviewing individuals still reeling from shock is emotionally and morally challenging. In leading such conversations, I meticulously choose every word to avoid inadvertently causing pain to the narrator, while offering support throughout the interview. Recording Holocaust testimonies felt like delving into the distant past, but the current situation is starkly different – the war persists, and it unfolds mere kilometers from our homes and loved ones...