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

1. Why is oral history important in Holocaust research?

Following the destruction of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, survivor-scholars[1] collected testimonies, gathered diaries, and encouraged other survivors to write memoirs.[2] Hundreds of testimonies, poems, photographs, and drawings appeared in memorial books (yizkor bikher) recalling the lives and deaths of Jewish communities and families.[3] Survivors testified at the trials of Nazi perpetrators and those accused of collaboration.[4] But not all served as witnesses or wrote personal accounts. Even

1 The term was coined by Aurélia Kalisky and embraced by Judith Lyon-Caen and Katrin Stoll. See: https://www.zfl-berlin.org/projekt/fruehe-schreibweisen-der-shoah.html Accessed 17 February 2024.
2 Natalia Aleksiun, "The Central Jewish Historical Commission in Poland 1944–1947", *Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry*, 2008, vol. 20, pp. 74–97; Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
3 Eliyana R. Adler, "Mapping a Lost World: Postwar Jews an (re)creating the past in memorial books", in Eliyana R. Adler and Sheila E. Jelen (eds), *Reconstructing the Old Country: American Jewry in the Post-Holocaust Decades* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017), pp. 68–86.
4 Laura Jockusch, "In Search of Retribution: Nazi collaborators trials in Jewish courts in postwar Germany", in Laura Jockusch, Andreas Kraft, and Kim Wunschmann (eds), *Revenge, Retribution, Reconciliation: Justice and Emotions between Conflict and Mediation: A Cross-Disciplinary Anthology* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2016), pp. 127–145; Andrew Kornbluth, *The August Trials: The Holocaust and Postwar Justice in Poland* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

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architects of invaluable written collections, and leading Holocaust historians – such as Philip Friedman (1901–1960), who pioneered historical scholarship on the Holocaust; Joseph Kermish (1907–2005), who established the Yad Vashem Archives; and Israel Gutman (1923–2013), historian of the Warsaw ghetto – kept silent about what had happened to them and their families. These perplexing gaps allude to the profound difficulty of creating a personal record of loss and destruction in the immediate postwar period. With such omissions, many personal and communal experiences were left unspoken. Oral history offers a chance to fill in some of these gaps.

Oral history has increasingly emerged not only as a powerful educational tool, but also as one of the crucial sources in Holocaust research. Interviews carried out under the auspices of institutions, accounts privately created for family consumption, as well as those recorded by scholars, fill in gaps and offer unique perspectives on the Holocaust. Oral history gives voice to experiences of survival. These testimonials, as witnessed and recalled by interviewees whose lives were intertwined with those of other victims, become windows into the lives and deaths of those who perished. They document occurrences, utterances, and stories heard during and after the war, elements we might otherwise lack. Whether rich with detail, or frustratingly rudimentary, they preserve a mosaic of facts, entanglements, circumstances, and emotions. Because oral history integrates personal witnessing and hearsay, it operates in aggregate, illuminating what may have been common experiences, but for which we have no written record. It details the fate of individuals, families and communities, of professional and political cohorts, and more. It builds a story through anecdotes and associations, revealing local networks as well as gender, generational, and class patterns. Oral history allows scholars a more nuanced, multi-layered history of the Holocaust that integrates contradictions, gaps and silences that other archival accounts may lack. Even when following a generic list of questions, oral history allows the interviewee to convey fragments of their individual biography. It helps us to contextualize and indeed revisit and problematize earlier accounts.

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

When I began my research on the lives of survivors in the immediate postwar period, I relied primarily on published memoirs and institutional records from a variety of archives. This was not simply a result of the rather conservative training at my first alma mater (the University of Warsaw and its Institute of History). In the first half of the 1990s, there was a great deal of excitement about archives in Eastern

Europe that had just become accessible to historians. In addition, the open border allowed for more archival research abroad. Making new acquaintances and seeking the advice of senior scholars, I engaged in conversations I did not always think of as oral histories.[5] These often spontaneous exchanges included bits of life stories of my interlocutors. In hindsight, I wish I had asked more questions. In Israel, Tzafrira Azrieli (1911–2004) mentioned she had studied at the Institute for Jewish Studies in Warsaw in the 1930s. She noted that Majer Balaban was among her teachers, but I did not think to ask her about her cohort of students. Hana Shlomi (1918–2010) discussed her research on Jewish life in Poland after the Holocaust, but I was then unaware of her involvement with the Central Jewish Historical Commission in 1945–1947, and her encounter with Philip Friedman. I did not inquire about her personal and professional trajectory. In London, Raphael Scharf (1914–2003) mentioned that he fell in love with the daughter of Mordechai Gebirtig (a renown Yiddish poet in Krakow) shortly before his own departure on the eve of the war. Back in Kfar Saba, Israel Oppenheim (1926–2011) recalled how he returned to his hometown in 1945, still hoping to be reunited with his family members because of their promises to each other. While these fragmentary, spontaneous dialogues were to some degree missed opportunities, my early conversations allowed me to build a context for my archival sources, to gain additional, still informal map of patterns and subtle details.

It was only a few years later, after having already been through another graduate training at New York University's Skirball Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies, while working on my next project about Jewish historians in Poland before the Holocaust, that I began to see oral history as a formal part of my research, rather than a personal and informal inclination.[6] Oral history has gradually moved from the margins, to playing a central role in my work. While carrying out research as a fellow at the USHMM, I began to listen to recorded testimonies, reading documents in parallel, most of them diaries, letters, and memoirs.[7] I was also encouraged by research librarian Vincent E. Slatt to reach out to survivors who might be willing to share their experiences of hiding and surviving in what is today Western Ukraine. During my fellowship talk, I met survivor Marcel Drimmer, whose photograph I had

5 Natalia Aleksiun, "Zionists and anti-Zionists in the Central Committee of the Jews in Poland: Cooperation and political struggle, 1944–1950", *Jews in Eastern Europe* (Jerusalem), 1997, vol. 2, no. 33, pp. 32–50.

6 See: Natalia Aleksiun, *Conscious History: Polish Jewish Historians before the Holocaust* (Liverpool and London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2021).

7 See Natalia Aleksiun, "Gender and the Daily Lives of Jews in Hiding in Eastern Galicia", *Nashim. A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, 2014, pp. 38–61; idem, "Uneasy Bonds: On Jews in hiding and the making of surrogate families", in Eliyana R. Adler and Kateřina Čapková (eds), *Jewish and Romani Families in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021), pp. 85–99.

found in an archive. He introduced himself right after I finished reading my paper, which included the story of his survival. This experience was truly transformative. Oral history became an important source not just for locating myself in the period, for getting 'a feel,' but for understanding individual and collective biographies in their local and transnational contexts.

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?

Access to oral history collections is very much linked to institutional funding and to scholars' ability to travel to such institutions as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C., the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris, or Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. These vitally important collections are, unfortunately, primarily accessible to scholars lucky enough to have affiliated institutions. This is why making digital access widely available is so crucial. It allows scholars and students to learn what oral history has to offer and what its limitations are. Recently, the University of Florida became one of the access points for the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, an invaluable collection of oral interviews. However, we are still raising funds to purchase permanent access to the Visual History Archive. Likewise, the USHMM has a rich collection of interviews, many of which can be watched without visiting the reading room. Similarly, there are lesser-known collections at local Holocaust centers and museums, such as the Samuel Proctor Oral History Program Collection and the P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History, at the University of Florida. These include about 200 interviews carried out by Prof. Samuel Proctor (1921–2005) – a pioneer in the field of oral history. As yet undigitized, these interviews with Holocaust survivors were carried out in northern Florida, primarily in Jacksonville.

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?

Scholars working with oral histories face both practical and ethical challenges, some of which are at the core of working with personal accounts, regardless of the

medium. Oral history makes these questions seem more urgent. In my experience, it renders the pain of retelling the Holocaust abundantly visible. It brings to the surface the question of the limits of our entitlement to ask every question we deem important: whether our research ought not merely unpack the complex layers of the story, but reveal the potential mistakes and omissions, inherent to personal accounts, that may consciously or unconsciously distort or color these accounts. Such may be the case if family members served in the Jewish police, or if behavior were a subject of communal censure and disapproval. Should historians reveal uncomfortable historical facts in the course of the interview or in the resulting publications? What aspects of personal Holocaust biographies are important enough to justify painfully intrusive questions or revelations? Do we have the moral right to pose every question that scholarship deems legitimate? Do we allow survivors to tell us only as much as they are willing to share? Do we have the right to prod or suggest alternative histories that risk tearing at the seams of their biographical fabric? Do we ask about babies that did not emerge alive from hiding places and moments that suggest to us that sexual abuse may have taken place? Do we probe uplifting stories of solidarity and resilience?

And what about "favorite" testimonies. As we collect historical material, we inadvertently connect with some survivors and their interviews more than with others. We are engrossed in particular biographical details, and drawn to personal eloquence. Some stories may fit our already crystalizing sense of what and how we want to write. How do we avoid privileging such testimony to the detriment of the less expected complexity?

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 war in Ukraine?

Many contemporary projects collecting testimony in Eastern Europe and beyond explicitly and implicitly build on Holocaust scholarship and the experiences of Holocaust documentation. Institutions, such the Center for Urban History in Lviv, and Centropa in Vienna, have become involved in collecting contemporary accounts of war. Similarly, scholars who worked on Holocaust oral testimony projects have

now begun systematically interviewing Ukrainian refugees in Poland.[8] They understand the urgency of creating such a record. As in the case of early Holocaust scholarship, many of these activists and scholars understand both the legal and historical significance of such materials. Such records may also rely on repeated accounts from the same witnesses. This is in contrast to the "one testimony" usually collected from Holocaust survivors, and the comparatively strict format used by the Shoah Foundation.

Contemporary documentation projects build on the understanding of such categories as age and gender. Because most men are not allowed to leave the country, testimonies of Ukrainian refugees abroad are dominated by women's accounts. Similarly, scholars seek to understand the effect of the war and forced emigration on children. We will only see contemporary biographical stories completed in some way when the war in Ukraine comes to an end.

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

In cases such as these, questions are raised and stories are shared while everything remains in flux. The ongoing nature of the war in Ukraine does not allow for a sense of closure for the interviewees. Oral history reflects a desire to document experiences without knowledge of how the events will end. Testimonies recorded in Ukraine shortly after the Russian invasion of 22 February 2022, and interviews with Ukrainian refugees abroad, are painfully raw, as interviewees search for proper language and struggle to reconstruct events. Their status as recent witnesses and survivors does not leave space for narratives of rebuilding lives, which are so important to Holocaust survivors in their oral testimonies, especially those recorded decades after the war. But many of the ethical challenges remain similar. We need to ask and listen emphatically, aware of the emotional and political limitations of what can be said to whom and what is unsayable because of collective trauma, fear, shame, and pain.

8 See: https://ukrainianstories.centropa.org/; https://www.lvivcenter.org/en/academic-en/research/documenting-war-2/ Accessed 17 February 2024.