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Oral History / Oral Sources - Polish Historians' Dilemmas

Marta Kurkowska-Budzan et Marcin Stasiak

1 Despite the permanent crisis of representation since the 1970s, which in principle eliminates any questions concerning the validity of oral accounts, the need to update our approach to oral sources has intensified among historians specializing in contemporary history in Poland. On the one hand, it is difficult for a researcher of contemporary history to remain indifferent to the large amount of sources which could potentially be elicited; on the other – the lack of established scientific principles of conduct, appropriate in light of the objectives of historical research, discourages the majority of academics from using this particular source material. Those Polish historians who attempt to work with oral accounts in a methodical manner, validated by scientific tradition, take advantage of the tools used in social studies and encounter an epistemological net in which the specific identity of historical research becomes blurred. Searching for an answer to the question of whether oral accounts are actually a "source" in our research of the past, allowing for the conceptualisation of human beings in a chronographic, chronometric and chronological dimension, is, in our opinion, the most urgent task for historians who strive to maintain their disciplinary identity.

2 The beginnings of oral history in Poland and Central and Eastern European countries were initiated in the 1980s within oppositional circles, which registered the accounts of people politically marginalized or persecuted, whose memories remained in conflict with the official version of history. After the fall of communism, this trend of civic activeness became institutionalized within archivization, educational and research activities, identified as oral history ("historia mówiona" in Polish). Such a genesis conditioned the specific character of Central European oral history, in which – aside from the Polish attainments – the output of Czech researchers deserves attention. In the Czech Republic, oral history achieved an organizational success by being situated on equal terms within the Czech Academy of Sciences, while Master's level studies are conducted within this discipline at the Charles University in Prague.

3 On the one hand, the grassroots civic beginnings of oral history in Poland determined its thematic scope. There is a predominance of topics connected to political history; in particular the history of the Second World War and other conflicts and confrontations of forces (Kałwa 2010). On the other, this demarcated the scope of use of the recorded accounts. With the passage of time, oral history gained increasing popularity and became largely the subject of documentary, educational and artistic projects, as well as those popularizing contemporary history. The most telling evidence of this characteristic fascination with oral history is the continuously growing amount of social projects and archives, starting with the collection of the "Karta" Centre – the History Meeting House in Warsaw, and ending with the collections gathered by local houses of culture or libraries, among others, those associated in the CATL network – the Digital Archive of Local Tradition (see http://dlibra.karta.org.pl/catl/dlibra). The accounts by witnesses of history ("świadkowie historii" in Polish) also perform a significant role as constituents of museum collections and exhibitions. The Warsaw Uprising Museum was not in fact the first institution of its type to initiate a permanent documenting program of oral history, but it was thanks to the easily identifiable brand of the Museum and the PR campaign it runs that the terms oral history and "witness of history" have entered mainstream public discourse. In addition, this has led to complications in the already indeterminate status of oral sources by introducing an exceptionally strong ethical and political aspect (similarly as, for example, in Germany's past, cf. Maubach 2013). This provides an impulse for considerations of whether the history of "witnesses" is capable of meeting the scientific standards expected in classical historiography, including the principle of impartiality. Observing a similar situation in the Czech Republic, Miroslav Vanek recently wrote, "*does this situation not lead to the rejection of critical history in favour of popular individualized reminiscing and recounting? In effect, will easily accessible memory not overshadow specialized critical information about the past?*" (Vanek 2013: 166)

4 This is not only our Central European dilemma. The American historian, Michael Frisch (1990: 187) categorized oral history as one of two approaches: the "*more history*" and the "*anti-history*" trends. In the "*more history*" approach, the measure of the value of oral information lies in its contribution to the development of our knowledge about the past – we receive "more history" and accumulate knowledge. In this case, oral history primarily has an epistemological dimension and represents the classical or modernist model of conducting historiography. The second trend in oral history, according to Frisch, is one in which the emphasis is placed on the process itself of creating an oral account from the moment of establishing initial contact with the interlocutor until the publication of the research. This is history shaped by the ethical imperative and it is this dimension which is the most significant. In this case, the stipulation of compensation comes to the foreground, as a form of giving voice to the excluded, the underprivileged, those who have been passed over, marginalized or defeated. In the 21st century, this type of oral history – especially in the USA, Canada and Great Britain – have constituted the core of so-called public history. From the broad definition, and even more so from observations of social practice, it should be concluded that a public historian is a limited intermediary in conveying individual and group history, with the aim of empowering and emancipating these groups, while the quality of his work is measured primarily by his involvement and skills in telling these stories. In light of the pluralism of truths and stories about the past, proficiency in historical methods, the tools of which come from a 19th-century positivistic paradigm, is not required in a

public historian. As a result, the question arises as to whether a historian can offer public history any exceptional skills, considering the well-developed communication technologies in today's world.

5 It seems that apprehension about the social effects of the rapid expansion of public history on professional historiography alongside a traditional solidified image of the hierarchy of sources are the reasons behind a permanently high degree of distrust maintained among academic historians toward oral sources.

6 The classic history that dominates the Polish academia, employs the "historical source" term, referring to positivist "factology". The source metaphor implicates the possibility of reaching new "base facts", where the historical truth awaits to be discovered. The historical source concept connotes clarity and transparency as a window pane, through which, one may see the past (Wrzosek 2010). We may mock the "naive approach of the positivist historians" as many like to say, however, it does not change the situation, in which an enormous majority of Polish historians, conducts historical studies, where the naive realism organizes both the aims and the method of scientific cognition

7 In this paradigm of historical research oral accounts do not constitute an integral part of the catalogue of traces of the past that are used by professional historians. Rafał Stobiecki, draws attention to the fact that the myth of "true history" arose in 1989 altogether with the opening of the Party and Security Services archives and the fetish of the archival source has strengthened then and during the debates on communist past (Stobiecki 2002a, 2002b).

8 Despite the encouragement to use oral sources and the indications of their positive qualities (Eisler 2003, Kierzkowski 2007), the archivists in social or public archives, libraries and museums, in which tens of thousands of recordings have been stored – are greatly surprised by the limited amount of interest shown in their collections by professional historians. In our opinion, this also derives from the indeterminate status of oral sources in historical studies, which remain in an external position to such sources, associating them with other disciplines or with the above-mentioned cultural and social phenomena.

9 If one looks for examples of a culturally similar milieu of academic historians who have maintained an open mind toward oral sources, then – aside from Czech historiography – it is worth mentioning the Ukrainians' approach, wherein they have also acquired institutional legitimization of oral history as an academic discipline (Grinczenko 2013). It should be emphasized that, similarly as in other countries, Ukrainian academic projects based on oral accounts which refer to individual historical experience are also conducted by researchers with diverse disciplinary proveniences. However, we are interested in the practices of historians executing specific historiographical objectives. For Ukrainian historians, the essence of working with oral sources lies in determining how the social context and its elements change from the historical perspective, while the construction of the message is based on "incorporating information taken from narratives into the wider background created by information originating from other sources" (Grinczenko 2013: 83).

10 In Polish academic circles, researchers who define themselves as oral historians occupy the other extreme to the above-described dominant approach toward oral sources. These include cultural anthropologists, academics connected to qualitative social research and historians belonging to the younger generation, influenced by qualitative sociological methodology and attracted by the vision of anthropologizing historical

studies. However, it is hard to categorize this academic domain as anything other than located at the borderlands between disciplines, in which there is a lot less history and particular historical methodology than sociology. Why does this occur? Science requires posing innovative research questions and searching for answers within clearly defined and validated academic tradition or within theoretical frames that have an academic or at least systematic character. Oral history is understood here as in equal parts comprising the recording of history (the role of the researcher is valued during the phase of eliciting the source and registering the data) and conducting analysis. The basic tool used at both stages in order to achieve an appropriate level of scientific sophistication derives from the methods applied by qualitative sociologists (cf. Czyżewski et *et al.* 1997, Kaźmierska 2008, Filipkowski 2010), next – from those of cultural anthropologists, and on numerous occasions even of linguists (e.g., Kudela-ŚwiĄtek 2013). In this paradigm, the oral account is primarily a "narrative" and not a historical source that can be approached using characteristic historiographical methods. These are methods which have been developed in order to achieve specific objectives and which together are determinants of the identity of our discipline. A historian aspires to grasp the broadly understood multidimensional aspects of time and of human beings within time. Our traditional research methods are subordinated to this task. Unfortunately, in relation to individual memory and narration, these methods are found to be of no use. There are enormous difficulties with chronology in oral stories or even with achieving a coherent grasp of a fragment of time for the needs of synchronic imaging of a given phenomenon. We experience an even higher degree of perplexity when dealing with issues connected to the psychological aspects of remembering, recollecting and forgetting. As a result, historians attempting to take on the challenge of using oral sources frequently apply them within the approach of memory studies. Memory studies is a multidisciplinary and multi-layered field which began with individual memory growing outward to focus on broader dimensions of social memory and the politics of public remembering (Keightley and Pickering, 2013). Working within this field, a historian writes him- or herself into the theories and methods of social studies, from among which the biographical method seems to be the most accessible.

11 Trevor Lummis wrote that oral history differs from the sociological biographical method in that, while acknowledging the subjectivity of the interlocutor, it is primarily interested in collecting information about social and historical structures (Lummis 1987). It seems that, at least in Polish academic circles, we have lost sight of this objective even before we have fully aligned the tools we need to achieve it. This has occurred in specific historical conditions. Much like the Czech and Ukrainian historians, we have been exposed to Western literature on oral history in the context of the postmodern breakthrough, which has left us only with narrative (Domańska 1999) As a result, we have taken a shortcut, adopting the history and experiences within this field as our own, while also copying the methods that could aid us in tackling narratives. The significant consequences of this are gradually becoming apparent, while subsequent historians struggle with the issue already at the stage of empirical studies. For example, the established legal norms in the West do not fully correspond to the traditions and legal regulations in Poland or in other Central and Eastern European countries (e.g., the issue of the copyright to the interview). Subsequent international conferences prove that many important differences exist in terms of methodological issues, which emerge from the specific character of research in countries with only

slightly – it would seem – divergent cultural and historical experiences. Western European literature does not offer us solutions to these issues, only providing a network of categories into which we attempt to fit ourselves, making compromises and often conceding to travel across territories to which we have not received a conceptual "map". And inversely, Western researchers, despite being well - prepared for working with oral sources, encounter issues they are not methodologically prepared for within the Eastern and Central European research context (cf. Niethammer 1992, Perks 1993)

12 The issue of oral sources in history is primarily addressed in all basic studies of the methods used by historians, from Marceli Handelsman to Jerzy Topolski, if we were to mention only the Polish academics. In his system of classification of historical sources, Marceli Handelsman acknowledged only written sources as "proper historical sources, *par excellence* historical documents" (Handelsman 1928:45). The objective/subjective dichotomy is mainly the subject of methodological considerations concerning written and oral sources that for centuries have weighed on the work of historians. However, in his methodology, Topolski opened up the path for any "dynamically conceptualized source" (Topolski 1983: 262). Such an intellectual climate laid the foundations for the conceptually modernist programme of a historiography that would make use of oral sources systematically and on a large scale (Kersten 1968, Kersten 1971).[1]

13 As early as in 1968, during the 10th General Congress of Polish Historians, Krystyna Kersten advanced a stipulation that remains current to this day that we should make use of elicited sources in historical research. In the 1971 text that developed this idea, she indicated the epistemological potential present in oral sources. At the same time, she was well aware that the possibilities inherent to this type of source could only be used under the condition that proper methods are elaborated for their acquirement and analysis. "*As a result of the inclusion of the method of eliciting sources into their research methodology, historians must sooner or later establish an apparatus of techniques that would ensure the scientific correctness of the creation of communications. These should be quite clearly defined rules of conduct, so that any departure from them would undermine the conclusions reached based on a given piece of material*" (Kersten 1971: 319). She also indicated the sources of possible inspiration. Firstly, she suggested referring to the achievements of social psychology and the psychology of memory. Secondly, she called for taking advantage of the achievements of sociology, within which work with elicited sources had a sound practical and theoretical basis. "*(...) The collecting of the testimonies of people, who without [the historian's] initiative would not have spoken out, would not have left traces of their actions, cannot cause [a historian] to disregard the apparatus of sociological research techniques and methods, otherwise he will become a homeworker, toiling away right next to a modern factory*" (Kersten 1971:318).

14 While noting the value of the inspirations flowing from social studies, Krystyna Kersten emphasized that due to the fundamental differences between the subject matter of historical research (change within time) and that of sociology, historians must elaborate their own *modus operandi* that would take into account the specificity of their own discipline.

15 Simultaneously, ethnographers from the Soviet Union also focused on vital issues for history, creating oral history in the 1970s and 1980s –developing techniques for conducting interviews, methods of establishing the veracity of sources and examining the research areas within which oral accounts could be used. As Dobrochna Kałwa writes, referring to Melnikova (2006), "*as a result of isolation from world research, the*

Russians constructed their own original conceptual apparatus, which, however, has been abandoned by contemporary researchers, who prefer to refer to Western methodological notions than to their own native research from the 1970s and 1980s (Kałwa 2010)

16 The theoretical discussion initiated in the 1960s and 1970s, resulting from postmodernist intellectual ferment, changed trajectory and the catalogue of issues formulated at that time was largely abandoned. There are no "false" sources, wrote the Italian historians Alessandro Portelli and Luisa Passerini in the 1980s. The distinctness of oral history comes from the fact that "untrue" statements are still true psychologically, while the original "mistakes" sometimes reveal more than accounts that are in accordance with the facts. The significance of oral testimonies can often lie not in its correlations with the facts, but rather in its differences in those areas where imagination, symbolism and desires intervene (Portelli 1981, Passerini 1979, Passerini 1987). In Great Britain, the historians gathered in the Popular Memory Group connected to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies w Birmingham, published a collection of articles entitled *Making Histories* (Johnson 1982). Their concept of working with oral sources consisted in studying constructions of collective memory and the interaction between the public and the private image of the past. In a few studies, they put the British to the test concerning their memories of the Second World War. While valuing that which is subjective in oral testimonies, in the 1980s and 1990s the historians undermined the thus far stringently observed division of historical categories into the private and the public (much like memory and reality). Postmodernism introduced new theoretical concepts into oral history and directed the research onto new trajectories. Life stories were recognized as living documentation of the constructions of consciousness, highlighting both the diversity of experiences within a given social group and the ways in which each individual story (as well as each self-identity) comes into being within culture.

17 To summarize, the main current trend in theoretical considerations within academic oral history circles upholds what was initiated during the crisis of representation and the linguistic breakthrough. Work with oral narratives requires breaking with traditional historiographical canons of thinking about the past, such as – among other things – objective chronology within linear time. Oral sources will not answer with any precision such questions as *when, how* and *why*. However, they can make us aware why we think that things happened in a certain way. As mentioned above, historians in their work are forced to make use of the theoretical achievements of social studies, which with time are adapted by historians, such as Schütze's biographical method (Schütze 1983, von Plato 2000).

18 There is no, however, alternative methodological proposition for historians aspiring to retain the essence of historical research, i.e. a comparable temporal dimension, or for those who perceive historical sources within the framework of traditional categories of representation. The authors of course books on oral history addressed to more advanced researchers (academics) avoid providing precise instructions concerning what a methodologically-correct interview should look like, while a lot has been written about the complicated nature of the interaction that occurs between the interlocutor and the researcher, about sensitivity and ethics. The lack of academic literature concerning the issue of techniques for eliciting sources and for their historical analysis stands in stark contrast to the rich literature on the subject of the methodological aspects of elicited data within the framework of qualitative sociology

and psychology (cf. Jagodzińska 2014, Silvermann 2011, etc.). While undoubtedly the achievements of these areas of study should function as a valuable inspiration for historians and as a certain foundation, simultaneously we need to develop our own path – a set of principles that would be subject to constant discussion and that would take into account the identity of the discipline (Domańska 2014).

19 We are not discussing here the Holocaust studies in Poland for which oral accounts have been fundamental materials.[2] The commissions that in 1945 began collecting testimonies of witnesses of Nazi crimes established for a long time a model of such a testimony and a figure of a "witness to history" in our public discourse (Kurkowska-Budzan 2011). Research activities of Polish Center of Holocaust Studies and the Jewish Historical Institute have contributed vastly to World War II historiography, however much less is their influence on methodological profile of general history of 20th century Poland.

20 In the Polish methodology of history of recent years, voices have once again surfaced calling for a re-examination of oral sources, also in the broader context of source studies. Marek Woźniak writes that "*(...)if we acknowledge a [written, traditional] source as a fragment of the past reality, its reflection or its representation, this carries with it specific cognitive consequences which refer to the issue of the veracity/objectivity of the source and the cognitive capabilities of historical studies. If, on the other hand, that a source at most „reflects" the author's cognitive horizons or views, then the subjectivity/objectivity of oral accounts and traditional sources will not be/should not be the subject of dispute*" (Woźniak 2010:82-83).

21 The identity issue is again underlined by a prominent Polish historian, Andrzej Paczkowski, a co-author of, among many others, the interviews-based monograph on the Polish dissident initiative of 1970s: Komitet Obrony Robotników (Workers' Defence Committee), who writes:

> (...) the specific nature of contemporary history [is] related to the distinctness of the sources examined by the historians, which may not be employed by the historians of the more distant past. Only a contemporary history scholar may deal with the so-called primary sources. Therefore, a historian may alone create - or rather co-create - the source, by speaking to someone who participated in a certain event, and ask about the course of events, or about the motivations behind doing something (or not) (...) The ability to apply such procedures is a significant distinct feature, maybe a decisive one: contemporary history would begin in a moment, where one would be able to refer to a source created by the historian (Paczkowski 2014: 17)

22 The stipulations formulated by Krystyna Kersten, despite the passage of years and the fact that some of the particular solutions have become obsolete, have not lost their significance for us historians. We are convinced that this prominent Polish researcher's appeal, which had been to some extent forgotten and in fact unanswered by our academic circles, is worthy of being brought back to light and developed in the era of post-postmodern explorations. To summarize, on the bases of the experiences of historians and taking into account their needs, as well as using the knowledge and methodologies taken from other academic fields, it is time to bring about the actual presence of oral sources in Polish historical studies.[3]

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NOTES

1. We would like to thank an anonymous peer reviewer of this article for underlining the fact that Polish archives during socialist era – until 1989, were not open for public. Hence historians who were researching recent past had immense problems with access to any sources. In this situation oral sources might had been seen a solution to lack of materials.

2. The Holocaust survivors' oral testimonies collection started in Poland as early as war ended and when the Main Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland was established. The purpose of the Main Commission was to investigate and collect evidence of Nazi German crimes and to publish the results of these investigations as well as the materials gathered in their course. A collection of memories from the period of the Holocaust was also gathered by the Central Historical Commission at the Central Committee of Jews in Poland, and then by the

Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. The depositions collected were to serve as evidence in trials of war criminals and research materials.

3. The article is based upon research supported by National Science Center, project no. 2015/19/B/HS3/01761.

RÉSUMÉS

Marta Kurkowska-Budzan et Marcin Stasiak nous emmènent en Pologne au sein de la communauté des historiens. Ils dépeignent le commencement de l'utilisation de sources orales parmi les historiens de l'opposition dans les années 1980. Ce tour d'horizon englobe les débats autour de l'expansion de la *public history* au sein des sciences historiques, et de la réticence des ces dernières. Les auteurs concluent par un plaidoyer à l'ouverture des historiens polonais aux sources orales et à la fin de l'emprise des sources écrites.

Marta Kurkowska-Budzan and Marcin Stasiak invite us to Poland as part of the community of historians. They describe the beginning of the use of oral sources on the part of historians of the opposition in the 1980s. This overview includes debates about the expansion of public history within the historical sciences, and the reluctance of the latter. The authors conclude with a plea to open Polish historians to oral sources and to ending the monopoly of written sources.

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Mots-clés : histoire orale, public history, enseignement de l'histoire orale
Index géographique : Pologne

AUTEURS

MARTA KURKOWSKA-BUDZAN

Professeure d'histoire contemporaine à l'université de Jagiellonian à Cracovie en Pologne, et habilitée à diriger des recherches depuis 2011, Marta Kurkowska-Budzan, a publié avec Marcin Stasiak l'ouvrage *Stadion na peryferiach* [Stades à la périphérie] (éd. Universitas, 2016) qui a été nominé au prix « Kazimierz Moczarski Historical Award » en 2017. L'ensemble de ses publications est signalé sur le site du département *Studies in Central and Eastern Europe : histories cultures and societies* de l'université Jagiellonian de Cracovie (http://www.ceestudies.historyczny.uj.edu.pl/about2/faculty/marta-kurkowska-budzan)

MARCIN STASIAK

Marcin Stasiak est en post-doctorat dans le département d'Histoire de l'université de Jagiellonia, Cracovie, Pologne. Son ouvrage publié avec Marta Kurkowska-Budzan, *Stadion na peryferiach* [Stades à la périphérie] (éd. Universitas, 2016) a été nominé au prix « Kazimierz Moczarski Historical Award » en 2017. Il a également publié, avec Marta Kurkowska-Budzan et Paul

Newsham, *Sporting Peripheries* dans la revue *The International Journal of the History of Sport* en 2017 (34 :10, p. 863-865).