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"Every interview is like a still photograph of a moving object" – interview with Professor Alessandro Portelli

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Alessandro Portelli is an oral historian, professor of Anglo-American literature at the University of Rome La Sapienza, author of books published in English: *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (1991), *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (1997), *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (2003) and *They Say in Harlan County* (2010), and recently also in Polish: *Odkrywając historię mówioną* (Discovering Oral History) (2023) issued by the 'Remembrance and Future' Centre; he is also the author of numerous articles, two of which have appeared in WRHM: *Co stanowi o odmienności historii mówionej?* (*What Makes Oral History Different*) (2018) and *We Are Not Going Back: Migrant Music as New Folk Music of Italy* (2020). As an oral historian, Alessandro Portelli recorded the accounts of workers in Harlan County, Kentucky, and Terni, Italy. The study of oral history also led him to found the Circolo Gianni Bosio in 1972, a circle focusing its activities on the study of folklore, culture and, of course, oral history.

The interview was recorded via Teams on 9 December 2022.

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Ewa Maj: This year 'Remembrance and Future' Publishing House has published a book by you, entitled *Odkrywając historię mówioną* (Discovering Oral History), scientifically edited by Professor Marta Kurkowska-Budzan. This book is a compilation of texts that you have written over the years. What was the basis for your selection of these particular articles for the Polish reader?

Alessandro Portelli: The aim was to, on the one hand, give a comprehensive idea of the kind of work that I have been doing. I think this was in fact a great opportunity for me to really go over the work of a number of years. And on the other hand, of course, I was addressing readers that come from a different history and learn in a different political context. Therefore somehow some of the articles I included were specially with Polish readers in mind and I tried to bridge some of the possible gaps of misunderstandings and political differences as well.

E.M.: In the articles included in the book, you touch many aspects of oral history; you draw on these sources. What do oral history sources mean to you then?

A.P.: That is a good question. Good questions are always questions to which there is no easy answer. To me basically it has meant a way of teaching and learning. Through oral sources I have been learning about people and histories and experience that I would not have known otherwise and learning not from abstract or

theoretical interpretations, which are very important, but learning from the flesh and blood of individual lives. Also in terms of my academic work, as a professor of literature which is mainly about writing, listening to the voices of people has helped me put my work on literature into context and recognize how writing and orality are not two opposites but two poles of a conversation, of an exchange of mutual representation support. On the one hand, it meant learning about lives and therefore learning about my life and also learning about language, learning about this essential aspect of society and human identity.

E.M.: You have mentioned two issues: language and voice. What is your understanding of the phrase 'we give the voice to the voiceless' during oral history interview?

A.P.: My understanding is that most people already have a voice. There is a famous essay by Gayatri Spivak[1] that has this very interesting title *Can the subaltern speak?*[2] The essay explains this question in a very articulate and plausible way, but my response in reading that title was: "I have even heard them sing" – most people have a voice, what they do not get is hearing. Moreover like in the famous Shakespeare phrase: "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears"[3] – we as interviewers are lending our ears, and this is the most important thing because when we talk in democracies about the right of speech, nobody challenges our right of speech. The fact it is just rendered useless because nobody's listening, so what we can offer is firstly: an ear – we listen – and secondly, because as intellectuals, as academics, as media people, we are in a position to access public discourse. What we do is not just our personal listening, but the fact is that we mediate between these very personal voices and public discourse, and somehow, we give access, which I think basically is what ultimately is the meaning of the phrase. We give a voice meaning a public voice, access to public discourse. Another thing from the human point of view is that we are really conscious of the fact that these are people and very often we talk to people that nobody listens to, not even in the family about the war events for example. At some point grandchildren do not want to hear about historical events and suddenly here comes somebody who wants to listen about the war and these peoples life stories. This is what we really offer: an ear and access.

1 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak – Indian cultural theorist and critic, inspired by deconstructionism, feminism, Marxism and postcolonialism. She is a professor at Columbia University in New York and also gives guest lectures around the world. Considered one of the most influential postcolonial intellectuals.

2 See R. Graham, *A Macat Analysis Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Can the Subaltern Speak?*, London 2019.

3 It is a first line of the speech delivered by Mark Anthony in the play *Julius Caesar* by William Shakespeare.

E.M.: Therefore we as oral historians are the listeners and we learn something from each and every witness to history and it seems that every conversation leaves a mark on us. What have you learned from talking to witnesses to history: firstly, about yourself and secondly, about the world?

A.P.: I have learned how people who are different from me perceive me. I have a couple of experiences in mind, and one of them is, I think, discussed in one of the articles. The fact that somehow the story that I got was shaped by what people thought I was. During conducting the interview with people coming from working class they immediately noticed my background which I was not aware of, because, paraphrasing the words of the great African American anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston[4], I was wearing my class like a tight shirt: "I could not see it for having it on – but they see it, and so suddenly I realised my difference."[5] And in a way, one of the things I have learned is that the real subject of the conversation – spoken or unspoken – is difference, it is a challenge to speak to someone else, to someone who does not share your experience. I have learned to see myself in terms of my class, my gender, and basically the other thing is that, as you said, every conversation is a learning experience because of course you may be a professor and the other person may be an illiterate peasant, but if you are doing the interview it is because that person knows things that you do not know. Otherwise, why would you do the interview? And the other thing you learn is humility and you get to know how ignorant you are, and you learn how to talk to coal miners, and you know that even digging coal requires a certain kind of knowledge. I remember one interview with a young man who spent a few weeks in a coal mine, and he said: "I realised I did not know how to handle a shovel." In order to handle a shovel, you have to have a certain technique, a certain way of using your body, a certain way of handling this tool. Another fact is that there is so many different kinds of knowledge, and mine is privileged, but it is not the only one. That is the other thing I have learned.

E.M.: So our experience and our knowledge stand in contrast, as it were, to the experience and knowledge of the witness to history. What other boundaries might arise between the witness to history and the researcher during a meeting?

A.P.: In one of the articles, I write about one African American lady, Mrs. Julia Cowans, who said to me: "Because you are white, I do not trust you." And then

4 Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) – American novelist, short story writer, folklorist and anthropologist. Of her four novels and more than fifty published short stories, plays and essays, the best known is her novel *Their Eyes Watched God* (1937).

5 Z.N. Hurston, *Mules and Men. Negro Folktales and Voodoo Practices in the South*, 'Perennial Edition,' New York 1970, p. 17.

she kept talking. At this moment I realised that the word 'dialogue' means literally talking across a boundary. Some contemporary linguists, like Julia Kristeva,[6] for instance, talk about the origin of language in terms of a slash that comes between signified and signifier. Therefore to me that slash, the boundary is somehow a slash that comes between the narrator and myself, and the dialogue is not only do we talk in spite of that boundary, but we talk because that boundary exists, and it generates meaning, dialogue. I do not think there is any such thing as a purely 'native' interviewer because even when a young man is interviewing his own grandfather, there is an age boundary, and there is an educational boundary. The interview is always about difference, always about otherness. As I said, it is a learning experience. If you talk to someone who is exactly like yourself, there is not much to learn. You talk to someone who is across the dialogue and that is a wonderful experience.

E.M.: I feel that we are talking right now about the equal relationship between the researcher and the witness to history. What does such an equal relationship mean to you?

A.P.: One of the reasons why a number of people subscribed to the communist myth or desire of equality, was that we were hoping for a world of equal rights, and it has not come about and also did not come about in the so-called communist countries that ultimately perished. The highest human ideal is equality, which of course is not the same as sameness. We can be different precisely because we are equals. Therefore in the world as it is today, in a number of contexts, the conversations are between unequals because of the privileged position of at least one kind of intellectuals and because we do have certain tools, and we have power or access. On the other hand in the interview context, authority resides in the interviewee because she or he is the one that knows her or his story, and is the one that takes the decision whether is going to tell you or not and whether to tell you or not depends on how you are perceived. Thinking of doing the interview where this lady, Mildred Shackelford, told me: "Coal miners know that you do not know much about mining, so they are glad to help you." Therefore somehow the aim of the interview is like an utopic moment in which you attempt to speak to each other as you might in an ideal world of equality. So again, the difference is right there on the table, even if it is unspoken, because you are speaking across that difference. And the difference is hardly ever a difference between equals.

E.M.: How are we as researchers able to come across this difference during an interview?

6 Julia Kristeva (born 1941) – Bulgarian-French linguist, psychoanalyst and philosopher.

A.P.: For me number one reason for doing this was an attempt to contribute to a struggle for equality. When you are trying to prove that working people or immigrants have a culture, that they have rights, at the same time you are trying to prove that equality is the aim. In a more personal way, in a one-to-one exchange, it means I am trying to get to know you, and the fact that somebody who is endowed with a certain social prestige and so on and so forth thinks that you are worth knowing can be empowering, just as I felt empowered by the fact that these people are listening and talking to me. It really gave me a sense that I was not wasting my time there, and their time.

E.M.: During this one-to-one interview some difficult, emotional moments may occur. What are the feelings in the testimony of a witness to history indicative of?

A.P.: As interviewer you are doing two things because on the one hand you are an objective academic historian and you are listening to the interview for some kind of knowledge, and on the other hand, you are a human being talking to another human being and unless you recognise the emotions, the pain, the traumas, then you do not really access that knowledge, so you can be only a competent professional if you allow yourself to be emotional because the emotion is part of the information. The other thing is respect – you do not want to intrude during the interview. And the fact that you are not being intrusive sometimes encourages people to talk; sometimes, it entitles them to shut up and say: "I will not go into it much deeper." But silences are as important as words because if someone says: "I do not want to talk about that" – the information you receive is that what the witness to history avoid to talk about it is unspeakable.

E.M.: Therefore what is the importance of emotions in oral history?

A.P.: 'Emotion' is a word that has been overused and somehow denuded by its use in the media, and sometimes you find it in education. There is always present a discourse of generating emotions. Emotions are just there. We keep talking about pain but joy as well, enthusiasm, and pleasure because, in the most cynical way we can put it, emotions are a way to knowledge. If you do not recognise the emotions, you do not understand the information. I think much of what oral history is about is subjectivity and its meaning. The meaning of an event lies in the kind of feeling. I would say 'feeling' is probably more correct term. You can talk about a mass massacre as objectively as a successful military operation. There is for example a huge difference between the fascist war narratives and the partisan war narratives. Once I interviewed this wonderful lady, Lucia Ottobrini,

who blew up carloads of NAZI troops. During the time of Resistance[7] she was very religious and said: "All the time during the Resistance, I was unable to speak to Christ because I did not think he would understand what I was doing." And so she did what she had to do, she did what was forced upon her and was not proud of it, and it is a lot of pain. Therefore you do not understand the meaning of antifascism, unless you understand these feelings because the act of pulling the trigger or setting an explosive can be the same, but what really changes is the kind of feelings they generate. In my book on Resistance[8] the only thing that I quote-unquote discovered, that had not been pointed out earlier in many histories, is that the partisans fell in love with each other, that partisans – men and women in the Resistance – married each other; there were love stories going on. And again, that tells you a lot about what the actions they were doing meant to them. What I mean is you cannot reach the depths unless you go through the surface. This somehow is the other way around. You do not understand the surface, the facts, unless you plumb the depths of the feelings.

E.M.: In this context how can we talk to a witness to history about difficult experiences like war or Resistance, for example?

A.P.: In a number of cases, that is actually what they want to do, what they want to talk about, and somehow, even the way in which you talk about things changes historically. One of the partisans that I talked to, Marisa Musu, said once: "Back in the 1970s I would talk to young people, and they would ask me about the military aspect of the Resistance. Young people today, they want to know about the feelings." The questions you ask of the same events of the same people, the questions themselves are historical; talking about the Resistance at a time when antifascism was more or less the official, the common sense of the nation and talking about the Resistance today when we have a perhaps ex, maybe not ex, Fascist party in power, it changes the whole thing. Talking about the Resistance with the student movement participants in 1968[9] was once thing, because they were

7 The Italian resistance movement (the Resistenza italiana and la Resistenza) – it is a term that stands for Italian resistance groups who fought the occupying forces of Nazi Germany and the fascist collaborationists of the Italian Social Republic during the Second World War in Italy from 1943 to 1945.

8 See A. Portelli, *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome*, New York 2003.

9 The 1968 movement in Italy or Sessantotto – was sparked by the disapproval of traditional Italian values, as well as protests taking place around the world. In May 1968 all universities, except Bocconi, were occupied. The background to the movement was the transformation of the Italian economy. Many Italian artists like Gio Pomodoro, Arnaldo Pomodoro, Ernesto Treccani and Gianni Dova occupied the Pallazzo della Triennale for fifteen days.

not that much interested in the history of the Resistance because they were rebelling against their parents, and that was the official narrative. It is another thing today, when it is no longer the official narrative. The Resistance song *Bella ciao*[10] is a very innocuous song; it is about dying for freedom, not – as in some versions that have been circulated around the world – about killing the enemy; it is not about communism; it is not a communist song to begin with. In fact, young radicals were critical of that song in the 1970s and today it is considered an extreme of opposition, radicalism. The song says: "I woke up in the morning and I found the invader." A lot of the people who are in power today in Italy were on the side of the invaders. So the way you talk about these things changes precisely because memory is not just a trace of the past; memory is a relationship between the time that is remembered, and the time in which you remember. And since the time in which you remember changes, the impact on what we remember about the past also changes.

E.M.: That is to say, the different historical context of the story, affects the final resulting story, which may have no end. Why do you advise students following Gianni Bosio[11] to never turn off their tape recorder?

A.P.: That was the only advice I received from Gianni Bosio. You do not turn off the tape recorder precisely because you are not there just to extract specific information. You never know when is the end of the story. Because you are interested in everything. One extreme example: I used to be too shy to ask people to please turn off the television when I was interviewing them so that a lot of my tapes cannot be used in radio because there is too much background noise – thanks to that nowadays we have precious documents about what people were watching on television when I was interviewing [*laughter*]. Even the meaning of all your recording changes – that is number one. Number two – it is just bad manners, impolite to turn the recorder off, as if to send the message that what the person is talking about is not interesting. Firstly you do not know what things you may discover. I have had a number of experiences of this, that what really is important in a conversation is not what you were looking for but what came up unexpectedly. And secondly, if you place your recording in an archive, it may be used by somebody 20 years later and this researcher will find that the things that are interesting are

10 *Bella Ciao!* is an Italian folk as well as protest song composed in the 19th century; it was sung by seasonal rice paddy female workers, especially in Italy's Po Valley of Northern Italy. It is assumed that this song is the anthem of the Italian resistance movement, but according to historians there is a lack of solid evidence for this. Various versions of the song are sung around the world as an anthem of freedom and resistance.

11 Gianni Bosio (1923–1971) – an Italian historian, publisher and editor, music researcher and exponent of the Italian Socialist Party.

precisely the things that you were just weathering through. There is a book that came out in Brazil just recently, a number of essays by different people, and the title is *The Unexpected in Oral History*[12]. We would hope that something unexpected would come up because if we only get what we expected, we make no progress. So, just let it go. And this was at a time when I was paying for my own tape and everything was expensive [*laughter*].

E.M.: [*laughter*] Thank you for all your responses and reflections. Would you be willing to add anything else from yourself?

A.P.: Firstly, it has been a privilege and a pleasure, and secondly every interview is like a still photograph of a moving object, and so this is about where I am at, where we are today. This is about the things that you find interesting. Maybe in a couple of years, you will ask different questions, or I would answer the same questions in a different way so we just keep moving, and that is that. There is one other thing that fascinated me with oral history: it never ends. You never have the full final word. It is always temporary. So, for today it was great.

12 *The Unexpected in Oral History: Case Studies of Surprising Interviews*, R. Santhiago, M. Hermes (eds.), New York 2022.