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Oral History. The availability of audiovisual materials online

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Over the last several years, we have witnessed an increase in the popularity of oral history among community archives.[1] Accounts are recorded not only by researchers and members of science institutions, as more and more grassroots initiatives (including community archives) start their activity by collecting oral history recordings. Oral history is also present in museums and cultural institutions (libraries, community centres); recordings are made for instance by the Białystok Cultural Centre/Ludwik Zamenhof Centre[2] or Biblioteka Publiczna im. Marii Konopnickiej (the Maria Konopnicka Public Library) in Suwałki.[3] This results from the general availability of recording equipment, but also of grants for documenting the history of a given community, location, profession or group. This trend inevitably invites the question of how these recordings are made, but also what happens to them next with respect to archiving, editing and publication. It should be mentioned here that thus far, in spite of discussions across various institutions (including the Polish Oral History Association), no unified set of rules has been established concerning the publication or editing of oral history recordings.[4]

Apart from the issue of entities making the recordings and the number of recordings being made, securing and editing the recorded accounts is also important.[5] This is particularly significant in the context of the community archives movement, which predominantly involves individuals with no archival training, which means no experience with handling the archival material after obtaining, recording or receiving it. This is why it is vital to teach people not only how to record, but also how to handle the recordings both after completing the particular project and each individual recording, as an inherent part of the idea of creating an archive is ensuring it will survive in a certain shape for more than several years. The goal is to preserve the archives for future generations and to make the resources independent of their immediate creators in a way so that their successors can easily use these resources without the need to painstakingly track their origin and the circumstances in which they were collected in each instance.

1 One of the indicators of this increased interest might be the number of oral history recording courses that are organised. Between 2020 and 2023, the Centre of Community Archives alone held forty courses of this kind (including online courses and guest workshops for the students of Polish universities).

2 https://mediateka.centrumzamenhofa.pl/ (accessed: 24.04.2023).

3 http://digi.bpsuwalki.pl/ (accessed: 24.04.2023).

4 Certainly, there exist guidelines concerning the editing of audiovisual resources intended for Polish State Archives, however the relevant ordinance is dated 1972, it is not widely familiar among community archives and does not treat about oral history recordings as such.

5 A significant role in planning how to secure recordings might be played by the document created by the Centre of Community Archives. See *Strategia wzmacniania trwałości zbiorów społecznych*, Warszawa 2023.

Archiving, editing and publishing oral history recordings depends directly on the entity which publishes them; this will be different for a museum collection, and different for a community archive. The issue of archival description as well as securing recordings and establishing specific guidelines are the challenges that Polish oral historians are currently facing, together with archivists, who might support them in this pursuit. All the while editing recordings remains a time-consuming process, regardless of whether a transcript is available or not. This is because often only fragments of audio files are made available, without any broader description or the context of the project they were created for (e.g. the project's goals, the criteria for selecting the narrators or the results that the project yielded). Oftentimes, recordings are not available online, and the interested party has to settle for a brief description and contacting the archive or the entity to use the recorded account. On the other hand, the accessibility of community archives that collect oral history accounts and record information on oral history projects guarantees that these sources are secured; even the information on the existence of such recordings alone can be key for the given archive receiving support in securing their oral history resources. The next step could be building proper repositories for oral history recordings (the web portal audiohistoria.pl containing the collections of the Oral History Archive of the KARTA Center Foundation and the History Meeting House does not yet fulfil this role – it is a collection of descriptions of audio collections and fragments of recordings). It is possible that in the future, the web portal ZbiorySpołeczne.pl can become a repository for community archives.

Notwithstanding the above mentioned problems and issues related to the accessibility of oral history, which the Centre of Community Archives also faces (as an institution supporting community archives), it is worth emphasising that the considerable interest in making oral history recordings brings with it a hope for a change in the historical narrative and for building a society that knows not only the 'grand' history, but also the 'ordinary' history – more local and therefore closer to the 'regular people.'

Oral history collections scattered across various locations

"For the future, your recordings and transcripts must be deposited, along with photographs, documents, and other materials you have collected, as a resource for future public use, and the best place for this is likely to be your city library or the archives of your local government,"[6] writes Paul Thompson in *The Voice of the Past.* The register of community archives in Poland kept by the Centre of Community

6 P. Thomson, *Głos przeszłości: wprowadzenie do historii mówionej*, trans. P. Tomanek, Warszawa 2021, p. 498. Back translated into English from the Polish translation.

Archives[7] lists over 700 entities, of which over 170 are run by libraries, 140 – by local associations, 104 – by foundations, and 81 – by other societies.[8] In addition to archiving materials 'for future public use,' it is also important that they are distributed in a way so that all interested parties can find them, including history enthusiasts, historians and researchers as well as journalists, reporters or animators and artists looking for inspiration and sources for their projects.

Community archives often publish archival collections and oral history accounts on their websites. One of the goals is to reach a wider audience[9] and create something that would be 'their own,' a website that will respond to local needs and become independent, along with the archive itself, from external factors. A website of a local society or foundation, the commune library or the local rural housewives' association is likely to be found by the locals, researchers or those interested in the topics tackled by these archives, but can they achieve country-wide or global reach? On the one hand, having a separate website can increase the community archivists' sense of distinctiveness as well as emphasize the uniqueness and specific nature of the archive, and on the other, creating a website frequently results from receiving a donation or financial support from local institutions. Community archives are initiated by the people, which sets them apart from state archives. They are maintained e.g. by NGOs, whose activity is characteristically project-based, and thanks to the funds obtained, for instance for setting up a website, these organisations can operate efficiently, since an organisation's budget is comprised of particular project budgets.

As part of their project *Praga Gada* (Praga Talks), on the project's website pragagada.pl,[10] Fundacja Animacja (Animation Foundation) shared several hundred fragments of approx. 150 interviews with the inhabitants of Warsaw's Praga district focusing on everyday life between the interbellum and 1980s. The published fragments were given unique, frequently subjective, humorous titles referring to their content, such as: *O torcie dla Stalina, który w Wiedniu przodownice przygotowały* (About a Cake for Stalin Baked by Model Workers in Vienna) or *O bikiniarzach, co kolorowe skarpety przywdziewali* (About Beatniks, Who Wore Colourful Socks). In addition to providing the basic details (full names of the narrators and interviewers), transcripts of all recordings were ensured. A search tool enables finding fragments according to the date they talk about, or to a tag from a list of keywords relating to geography, people and topics. Additionally, apart

7 The register of community archives in Poland was created in 2012 as part of the activity of the KARTA Center Foundation. Since 2020, it is kept by the Centre of Community Archives. See https://cas.org.pl/baza-archiwow (accessed: 24.04.2023).

8 As on 24 April 2023.

9 See P. Thomson, *op. cit.*, p. 499.

10 https://pragagada.pl/katalog (accessed: 25.04.2023).

from the recordings available on the website, videos can be viewed on the project's YouTube channel.[11]

An example of a digital archive of social character, i.e. an Internet location where an entire community can share their collections could be Miastograf – the digital archive of the people of Łódź – a website founded by the Lodz Urban Initiative Association 'Topografie.' In addition to oral history accounts, the website features press clippings and photos from the city dwellers' private collections. The materials can be browsed using an advanced search tool by entering a keyword, selecting the time period and type of archival material. For some of the biographical accounts shared as audio fragments, details of the narrator are provided, as well as a brief biography, their portrait photo, key tags describing the contents of the recording, and a transcript. Additionally, an element that undoubtedly merits a mention and makes this website stand out is the fact that the materials are assigned their spot on the city map. This method of presentation of source material enables the audience to have a virtual tour of Łódź in a selected place and time in history.

The largest Polish oral history resource, with over 6,000 audio and video biographical interviews, is the collection of the KARTA Center Foundation and the History Meeting House.[12] On the website audiohistoria.pl, the audience can access the entire catalogue of oral history recordings made by both organisations. Recording descriptions, interview summaries and short biographies of interviewees are also available there. In 2016, the History Meeting House decided to share several hundred recordings with transcripts on the website relacjebiograficzne.pl. The audio of the recording can be played simultaneously with the transcript. It is also possible to select a particular fragment and play the recording from there. Moreover, the website offers full-text search which enables searching the entire archival collection or individual interviews.

11 https://www.youtube.com/@PragaGadaTV (accessed: 25.04.2023). On the YouTube channel, several different entities present their oral history recordings, including community archives such as for instance Stowarzyszenie Biskupia Górka: https://www.youtube.com/@stowarzyszeniebiskupiagork3753 (accessed: 25.04.2023), Stowarzyszenie Podgórze https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VzIaLsFkVs&list=PL_2y2nNtotEtB78zxTVJjNEyNxF6bNrKy (accessed: 25.04.2023).

12 "The first recordings date back to 1987 when the Eastern Archive, initiated by KARTA when it was still an underground organization, began an operation aimed at recording the recollections of inhabitants of Poland's former Eastern Borderlands – Polish citizens who had suffered repressions by Soviet authorities. Twenty years later, the Oral History Programme was joined by the History Meeting House, and the Oral History Archive has now been expanded and new recordings are constantly being added. As a Warsaw municipal institution of culture, the HMH primarily collects the recollections of the oldest inhabitants of Warsaw, but also promotes the interviews which already make up the collection." See https://audiohistoria.pl/o-nas (accessed: 25.04.2023).

The collection can also be accessed as part of 'Special projects' such as, for instance, *Stan wojenny. Relacje świadków* (Martial Law. Witness Accounts) or *Wsłuchaj się w wolność. 4 czerwca 1989* (Listen to Freedom. 4 June 1989), or by selecting a particular person in the tab: 'Witnesses.' Apart from recordings with transcripts and numerous biographical notes introducing the narrators, some accounts additionally feature galleries of archival photographs from the interviewees' personal archives. The materials gathered on the website are accessible upon free registration.

As illustrated by the above examples, oral history recordings can be published on the organisation's or archive's website, or on a website created specifically for a particular project. However, it is difficult to find and research oral history accounts scattered among so many places across the Internet; it is also difficult to expand beyond the local. More and more often, places housing collections from several different archives can be found on the Internet.

The platform Polish Digital Libraries Federation is a countrywide website where one can find resources gathered by cultural institutions, including primarily libraries (the Jagiellonian Digital Library, the Wielkopolska Digital Library or the e-library of the University of Warsaw[13]), and among the materials available are books, papers and magazines from before the Second World War. The website also features resources from community archives, and among the materials published there are documents, photos, personal and community collections, but also oral history accounts. Using the digital library system, entities such as the 'Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre' Centre in Lublin have been publishing their audiovisual collections for years.[14]

The Archiwum Historii Audiowizualnej Warmii i Mazur (Warmia and Mazury Audiovisual History Archive) was created, as stated by the founders of the archive and the website ahawim.pl, to "keep the memory of the people of Warmia and Mazury by gathering the audiovisual resources scattered across the region and by recording new interviews with the eldest living generations of the inhabitants of North-eastern Poland."[15] The collection accumulated in the archive has been deposited in the National Archive in Olsztyn, and on the website, one can find selected fragments, descriptions and summaries of recordings. To listen to the accounts in full, one should visit the library of the National Archive in Olsztyn. It is worth noting that the resources published on the website feature recordings from smaller local entities (e.g. The Grajewo History Chamber or the Stowarzyszenie Mieszkańców Gminy Dąbrówno – Nasze Miejsce na Ziemi [Dąbrówno Commune Residents' Association – Our Place on Earth]), for which the opportunity to

13 http://fbc.pionier.net.pl/pro/zrodla/#listsheader (accessed: 25.04.2023).
14 https://biblioteka.teatrnn.pl/dlibra (accessed: 25.04.2023).
15 http://ahawim.pl/onas (accessed: 25.04.2023).

secure their audio collections by a larger entity was a particularly attractive offer, considering their limited oral history recordings sharing and securing capabilities.

The zbioryspoleczne.pl portal – archival records, including oral history accounts, published in one place

The KARTA Center Foundation, the Archiwum Społeczne wsi Głogoczów (Community Archive of the Głogoczów Village), the Kcynians Sound Archive or the Memo Foundation – these are some of the community archives that have published their collections, in part or in whole, on the zbioryspoleczne.pl portal of the Centre of Community Archives. Although they are not numerous, the founders of the website believe the trend is rising, and more fragments of audio and video recordings will continue to be added to the portal for at least two reasons. Firstly, considering the attractive presentation of audiovisual materials. Secondly, thanks to the Kongres Archiwów Społecznych (Community Archives Congress), which in 2023 is organised for the fifth time, the theme being oral history.[16]

The Centre of Community Archives first showed the new version of the portal[17] in the spring of 2022, and at the moment as many as 230 community archives share their resources there.[18] In addition to biographical account recordings, the website also features, among others, photographs and documents obtained often in the course of organising and making the recordings. All these types of archival materials can be examined in convenient ways, for instance by enlarging photos, and the Mirador tool enables reading elements such as wall writing, the name on an old shop sign or the tram number.

Archival materials – photographs and documents as well as audio and video recordings – can be viewed on the website as long as community archives decide to publish them online, and as long they publish and describe them in the Open Archiving System,[19] a free tool for gathering, recording and correctly documenting collections, made for users who are unfamiliar or only partially acquainted with archival methodology. Only after the archival descriptions are ready and the files are uploaded to the editor panel in the Open Archiving System, the materials

16 The Kongres Archiwów Społecznych (Community Archives Congress) is a biannual event for community archives and other entities which are interested in the idea of community archive keeping. The first edition (2015) as well as the following two (2017 and 2019) were organised by the KARTA Center Foundation (karta.org.pl). Since 2021, the organisational duties were passed on to the Centre of Community Archives. More at: https://cas.org.pl/kongres-archiwow-spolecznych (accessed: 25.04.2023).

17 Between 2017 and 2021, the portal was located at the url: http://osa.archiwa.org. Between 2017 and 2019, it was managed by the KARTA Center Foundation.

18 As on 25 April 2023.

19 Between 2017 and 2021, the Open Archiving System was managed by the KARTA Center Foundation, and since 2020, the Centre of Community Archives has been the administrator.

can be published on the Zbiory Społeczne portal. In one place, published are over 135,000[20] materials of various types, uploaded by community archives from all over the country – materials that are unique because of their topic, but also the institutions and organisations which uploaded them. The Great Man Foundation has published the legacy of the distinguished Polish mountaineer Jerzy Kukuczka, the Zbigniew Seifert Foundation – materials related to the history of Polish jazz music, and the Towarzystwo Oświatowe im. Cecylii Plater-Zyberkówny (Cecylia Plater-Zyberk Education Society) – documents related to the activity of Cecylia Plater-Zyberk and to education. These collections, previously dispersed, thanks to the work of hundreds of history enthusiasts passionate about the history of places, events, and social life, found their shared space online. Although the resources gathered at zbioryspoleczne.pl are mostly photographs and not audiovisual materials, the opportunities provided by the possibility of documenting and uploading audio and video recordings to the Open Archiving System are worthy of attention.

Oral history resources – text, image and sound played simultaneously thanks to automatic transcription

Paul Thompson reminds us that "...until we have a full transcript of the recording, it will be very difficult for anyone apart from the person who made it – and as such knows its content – to use it."[21] The Open Archiving System offers the service of automatic transcription. After sending a file to be transcribed, one can get a text complete with timestamps in under an hour or even in several minutes. The process takes half of the time of the recording. Although manual transcription with full timestamping may have the advantage of greater accuracy and detail, automatic transcription takes considerably less time, and it is worth taking advantage of this service. Certainly, the output does require editing in line with transcript guidelines,[22] still the process is much quicker than manually preparing a transcript by a human.

The automatic transcription service which was implemented in the Open Archiving System enables simultaneous presentation of text, image and sound while watching video recordings or listening to audio recordings at zbioryspoleczne.pl. With the service, while playing the recorded account on the Zbiory Społeczne portal, we will be able to read and follow its transcript as well. Subtitles are displayed simultaneously with the sound and image as they are being replayed just like during a film projection in the cinema, only they are not layered on top of the image, but can be seen directly underneath it. Additionally, recordings can be played from

20 As on 25 April 2023.
21 *Ibidem*, p. 572.
22 For more on how to correctly prepare a transcript, see P. Thomson, *op. cit.*, pp. 571–582.

any moment, as the transcription can be activated from a given paragraph or line of the transcript after clicking on it. Recordings and transcripts can be shared publicly, but they can also remain offline, only available to the community archive and its employees, if the interviewee reserved the right to their publication.

Oral history accounts published on the portal zbioryspoleczne.pl

The first to be published on the Zbiory Społeczne portal were, among others, biographical accounts of the residents of Andrychów,[23] interviews with the members of Koło Gospodyń Wiejskich w Głogoczowie (Głogoczów Rural Housewives' Association),[24] testimonies of opposition members in times of the Polish People's Republic[25] or fragments of folk songs performed by artists from Lower Silesia.[26] The audiovisual materials are as diverse as their creators who make them for their archive or for particular projects lasting from one to several years. On the portal, next to the published fragments of audio and video recordings and their transcripts, we can find information on the time and place of creating the recording, biographical notes on the interviewees and short summaries of the content of each recording. The search tool enables filtering the search results to only show materials that feature files, selecting a particular time period or a particular keyword from the geographic, subject or personal index, provided that the archive which published the recording entered such information. The more detailed the description and metadata, the quicker one can reach the recording they are interested in.

Conclusions

Why are archiving and wider publication of oral history accounts important to make them more accessible? Let this passage from Thompson's book, concerning projects carried out using the oral history method in the United Kingdom, be a guideline and a warning

> Projects which were immortalised by being archived online can now become a resource for other researchers. This applies particularly to cases where a given group managed to raise enough funds to digitise their recordings and have them transcribed. Unfortunately, many older interviews conducted by British teams are difficult to access, because they were never archived or they were kept by a local archive which did not survive.[27]

23 https://zbioryspoleczne.pl/zbiory/PL_1061_AGA (accessed: 25.04.2023).
24 https://zbioryspoleczne.pl/serie/PL_1072_007_001 (accessed: 25.04.2023).
25 https://zbioryspoleczne.pl/serie/PL_1001_SAS_0001_0001 (accessed: 25.04.2023).
26 https://zbioryspoleczne.pl/zbiory/PL_1027_1 (accessed: 25.04.2023).
27 P. Thomson, *op. cit.*, p. 489. Back translated into English from the Polish translation.

Undoubtedly, more and more initiatives in Poland resulting in interviews find their space on the Internet, whether on the websites of entities which launched them or ones created with protecting and publication of various materials, including audiovisual materials, in mind. The more oral history sources are shared online, the greater the probability of them being found by researchers, historians, but also artists, journalists and creators, for whom these materials can be the basis or starting point of their work. Similarly, the more oral history materials are made, the greater the chance for people who have not yet been given a voice to have it. Oral history projects can be carried out anywhere, by interviewing members of a community, a group or a family. An interview with one person will contribute one point of view, and with many people – a variety of perspectives, showing the multi-dimensional nature of history.