# Alessandro Portelli, *Odkrywając historię mówioną* (Discovering oral history), Marta Kurkowska-Budzan (ed.), Ośrodek 'Pamięć i Przyszłość' (the 'Remembrance and Future' Centre), Wrocław 2022, pp. 292

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In the field of oral history, Alessandro Portelli is a classic author. Being included in the group of important co-founders of the discipline, whom others recognise and refer to, can certainly be nice for the author distinguished in this way, but it should also be a source of concern. We all know the paradoxical phrase from *Ferdydurke* by Witold Gombrowicz: "Słowacki was a great poet!" Once an author becomes a classic, no one reads him anymore; for a set text, the belief imposed from the outside that he is 'great' is enough. Everyone knows important authors, but only a few study them. Yet their reflections cannot be reduced only to extracted fragments of texts. Details, openness to interpretations, the possibility of arguing with the authors and disagreeing with their proposals are important.

The anthology of Alessandro Portelli's texts *Odkrywając historię mówioną* (Discovering oral history), edited by Marta Kurkowska-Budzan, published in 2022 by the 'Remembrance and Future' Centre, is an important step to ensure that its author does not end up among the important, respected and unread. Even if one knows foreign languages, the reception of texts that have not been translated into one's native language is simply much weaker than those that are available in translation. I do not think this is specific only to Polish, but rather it is a universal rule.

If we consider English the *lingua franca* of the academic world, it should be noted that all the articles collected in the anthology were first published in Italian – so access to them for Polish readers has so far been doubly difficult, because knowledge of Italian is certainly less prevalent than that of English. Only three texts are translations of English extended versions of Italian first editions, which undoubtedly justifies the decision not to use the latter as the basis for the translation.

The initiator for publishing this anthology was Marta Kurkowska-Budzan, who, like the author of the book, is a researcher and populariser of oral history. Not only did she provide the impetus and persuade the publisher to prepare this publication and ensure the coherence of the entire translation, but she also mediated in conversations between the author and the publisher from the very beginning. I can only guess the amount of work that went into this process, the number of e-mails exchanged, conversations with the author – the whole process of moulding the final shape of the publication, which at the end is hidden behind the concise phrase: 'academic editing.' This work is worth appreciating.

The book opens with an introduction by the editor. The undoubted value of this is that it not only outlines the academic biography of Alessandro Portelli but also shows him as a man of flesh and blood, an enthusiast who combines Weber's two dimensions in his work: profession and vocation.

The anthology, apart from a short introduction addressed specifically to Polish readers, collects twenty texts written over the last fifty years. They were selected and arranged by the author himself. The very time span between their

creation indicates that we are dealing with a researcher experienced in the field of oral history. The fact that the oldest of them were created in the 1970s also tells us something more important about him and his academic path, which he himself, perhaps out of modesty, could not discuss. He is undoubtedly one of the forerunners of oral history, understood not simply as a way of documenting the past consisting in listening to people's voices and stories in order to derive knowledge from them about human experiences and past events (in this sense, oral history is, ultimately, the older sister of written historiography, because after all, talking about the past preceded writing about it), but also considered as an attempt to combine this practice with theoretical reflection.

From the beginning of his academic career, Alessandro Portelli has also been close in his thinking to another classic author dealing with oral history, Paul Thompson (who refers to the works and texts of his Italian colleague in the latest edition of *The Voice of the Past. Oral History*). Both of these men not only popularise oral history as a research method, but also express the belief that it is not reserved only for representatives of the academic community. Oral history is therefore very democratic in its essence, which they both appreciate. However, this democratism does not mean that it is a less serious activity and that the knowledge about the past that we gain thanks to it is less reliable, as was often suggested by historians of previous generations who adhered to different paradigms.

The pioneering work of both authors served to pave the way for oral history to enter the academy, proving that it is not inferior to other research tools available to historians, and that its cognitive value cannot be denied. Today, the door seems, if not forced open, to be at least significantly ajar. Undoubtedly, Alessandro Portelli has a lot to contribute to this.

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The anthology gives us insight into the author's three main areas of interest, the first and third of which he himself indicates in his introduction. The first is a reflection on what makes oral history unique, in terms of the meeting between both those recorded and those recording it (also when it goes beyond the situation of recording and documenting itself); the second is a reflection on the difference between events and the memory of them, and also on the language of recorded stories and the way they are constructed; the third is the use of knowledge and thoughts from the first two areas on the margin of considerations on important topics and research projects that have occupied the author's interests for years: the history of the workers' movement in Italy and the USA, and the history of the Italian resistance movement.

Alessandro Portelli does not equate oral history to the methods and workshop of 'traditional' historians (I use quotation marks here on purpose, because this term can only be conventional); he does not blur its specificity to prove that it is not much different from them but emphasises what constitutes its uniqueness.

He gives the best explanation of his view on this matter in the text *What makes oral history different* (it is worth noting that this is a statement, not a question), which Polish readers have already been able to become familiar with thanks to the special issue of 'Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej' from 2018, edited by Dobrochna Kałwa and Piotr Filipkowski. It is understandable that – even at the expense of repetition – it could not be omitted from this collection. Its absence would have been felt in the structure of the entire anthology, in which the texts interrelate with each other.

The text is replete with valuable observations, but for me the most important of them are probably contained in the following two sentences (although the Polish translation of the term 'oral sources' raises my doubts): "Oral sources are reliable, but their credibility is different. [...] the diversity of oral history results from the fact that even 'erroneous' statements remain psychologically 'true' and this truth can be as important as factually reliable accounts."

The author appreciates the importance of myths in social life. Like Claude Lévi-Strauss, he seems to tell us that they cannot be considered in terms of the opposition: truth versus falsehood. The logic of myths is different, and they have a different function. They say a lot about human reality, but in a different way. We have to learn to read them. Therefore, factual errors and those related to the reporting of the course of events concerning the massacre committed in the Ardeatine Grottoes and the deportation of Rome's Jews during the war by the Germans or, after the war, the murder by the Italian police of one of the demonstrating workers, Luigi Trastulli, become in themselves for Alessandro Portelli a pretext for reflection and lead to important conclusions.

For me, the second text that contains inspiring thoughts at a meta level is *Notatki o historii mówionej i władzy* (Notes on oral history and power). Here, in turn, I consider the following words to be key:

> It is often said that thanks to oral history, 'we give a voice to those who have no voice.' This is not the case. If people from the dominated classes did not have a 'voice,' we would have nothing to record and nothing to listen to. People who are excluded, marginalised and who have no power have a voice – what they lack is a hearing, which they do not have access to, perhaps except in the intimate space of the closest interpersonal relationships. Our work is to register this voice, to amplify it, to spread it, to make it heard in the exercise of the democratic right of expression, which includes not only the right to speak, but above all the right to be heard.

I mention these two texts, quoting quite long passages from them, because reading them made the greatest impression on me. However, this is my subjective choice. And I would like to emphasise once again that authors' overall reflections should not be reduced to individual texts or sentences. My copy of the book is full of underlining and exclamation marks in various places, but these two impressed

me the most. I decided to share them with readers to encourage them to read the entire anthology and choose something for themselves.

When it comes to reading the entire anthology, it can be noted that it contains some repetitions. Even entire sentences are repeated. I am writing this, but I am not convinced that it can constitute a remark. We are dealing with a selection of texts written over the years, but also on various occasions (not only articles, but also conference presentations and lectures). It is therefore not surprising that sometimes the author repeats an idea – it is difficult to expect him to present the same idea anew for the next text. The form of publication is also important for the assessment of these repetitions – an anthology as a collection does not have to be read in its entirety (which I always encourage); you can also select individual texts from it. If so, repetition seems necessary because we cannot count on the reader reading about it sooner or later.

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While reading the anthology, what is noticeable is Alessandro Portelli's sensitivity to the language of the story and its semantic aspects – perhaps reinforced by the author's education as a philologist and literary scholar. On the one hand, this attention to the language of stories should not be surprising, since in oral history it is important not only what is told, but also how it is told. At the declarative level, everyone dealing with oral history will probably agree that not only are the meanings themselves important, but also specific words, sentences, and their rhythm... On the other hand, oral histories more often function in a mediated form, i.e. texts, not source texts (which also has its own specific reasons that should not be underestimated), and this in turn causes their linguistic specificity to become somewhat blurred.

In the text *Życie i śmierć słowa* (The life and death of the word), there is a statement with which I am ready to argue: "Like all other archival documents, precisely because, fortunately, it is immobile, an audio document can be read, listened to, interpreted, analysed, and used in a thousand different ways, but, as Walter J. Ong says, it still says the same thing." In my opinion, recordings at different times – along with the knowledge acquired, changes in our sensitivity, new questions we come with – can tell us different things. It is impossible to develop this polemic here, so let this fragment be just an example of what I wrote at the beginning – access to the most complete exposition of the thoughts of authors gives us a chance to think about our own assumptions.

While we are considering the issues that raised my doubts, Alessandro Portelli states at one point that he never turns off the recorder. This declaration concerned me a bit at first. However, I suppose it is just an authorial shortcut. Perhaps it was because his recorder was always ready to record – just as when he was travelling in a car with Annie Napier from Harlan County, Kentucky, and hung the microphone on the mirror to avoid missing out on her stories.

And the last thing that aroused some resistance from me was the issue of authorising and agreeing published texts with their interviewees. What raises my doubts is not the postulate itself, which I have also heard in the Polish context, but the practicality of its implementation. I am not afraid that during the authorisation process the interlocutors will 'spoil' the original statement or even change its meaning (although one may then ask whether after such authorisation we are still dealing with oral history, or whether we are not imperceptibly moving to a new source – a written and authorised account, therefore more of a document than an oral history). For me, the basic problem here is the answer to the question what about authorization when, after the time that has passed since our meeting and conversation, it is not possible to reach our interlocutors – this may not be a common case, but it is not just a theoretical category. How can we reach older interlocutors who do not have a telephone, not to mention e-mail, when returning to them is not an option (in the Oral History Archive of the KARTA Centre Foundation and the History Meeting House there is, for example, the collection 'Poles in the East,' which contains recordings from Belarus, and also Ukraine), and discussing authorisation by traditional mail seems to be a misguided idea? An even more serious problem concerns the authorisation of published texts whose narrators have passed away. This last dilemma sooner or later becomes relevant for every oral history archive. I did not find answers to questions about these limitations of the authorisation and reconciliation postulate in the anthology.

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The review talked about the history of the workers' movement, in one of the quoted fragments the concept of dominated classes appeared; it can be added that the author is interested in anti-fascism, Italian communism, and socialism. He is convinced that in our work we cannot limit ourselves only to examining the past but should also strive to change the world in which we live. The author's *credo* could probably be included in the sentence ending the text already quoted: *Życie i śmierć słowa* (The life and death of the word): "Therefore, we should work not only to tell the story, but also to change it, to force 'the one' – whoever he is – to do 'things that are just', both in heaven and on earth."

Alessandro Portelli is undoubtedly a man of the left, based on the above quote – but also on reading the entire anthology – it can probably be said without exaggeration that he is also a man who is a firm believer... in social justice and human solidarity.

For Polish readers, his interest in communism may be interesting, and perhaps even slightly disturbing for some – which is determined by our local historical context and broadly understood historical politics. Italian communism and the role of the Italian Communist Party in the post-war history of this country is an issue for a separate text and for an expert on the subject. Here, I just wanted to note that reading the anthology also gives us valuable material for reflection in this respect.

For those concerned about the author's attitude to communism – but I hope also for those curious enough to read *Odkrywając historię mówioną* (Discovering oral history) – here is just one quote from the text *Film o Birkucie* (A film about Birkut) written in 1982, which opens the anthology. It was inspired by Andrzej Wajda's *Człowiek z marmuru* (Man of marble), and was also a tribute to 'Solidarity' movement, which was going through a difficult test after the introduction in Poland of martial law:

> I was born to politics in 1968, so to me the Soviet Union was always a model to be rejected and refused. Yet, I was always intrigued by the comrades and friends to whom it was instead a point of reference and an unshakeable myth – most of all because I soon realized that, while their Party was increasingly falling into the hands of bureaucrats, opportunists and yes-men, yet among the members I had met many of the people I love most, the staunchest fighters for equality and freedom, the least selfish human beings I ever met.

This fragment gives insight not only into the author's attitude to communism, including Italian communists, but also shows his faith in other people, evidence of which is also given in other texts in the anthology.

Undoubtedly for Alessandro Portelli, oral history is, above all, an opportunity to meet a person, a way to understand their choices and get to know the truth that guides them. For me, this is the most important, but not the only, reason to read this book. Let me end this review with a sentence from the text *Historia mówiona poza wywiadem* (Oral history beyond the interview), which largely reflects my own experience with oral history and the encounters it makes possible: "If someone comes out of an interview unchanged, he may have wasted his time. These may be imperceptible changes, but over the years they accumulate and make us who we are as people, not just scholars or activists."

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Finally, two editorial remarks: I am convinced that in anthologies the translators should always be indicated next to the texts they have translated, and not just given their names on the editorial page. This is not only a cause for praise for them as authors, but also a title of responsibility for the translation. It speaks well of the publisher that this omission has been corrected by the addition of an errata.

The second thing concerns a trivial matter, even technical, but it makes things easier for readers, especially anthology readers, who quickly browse through the book to find a text but do not want to return to the table of contents. On the actual pages of this anthology, the title is repeated every time, which is unnecessary. Instead, it would be nice to simply have the titles of the chapter we are reading.