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# Report on the Oral History Seminars

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Originally written in Polish, translated by Language Room Agata Wiącek.

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As announced in the article *Czas na analizę* (Time for analysis),[1] five Oral History Seminars were held in Warsaw from January to May 2023. This initiative of the Polish Oral History Association and the Qualitative Data Archive of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences (hereinafter: IFiS PAN) brought a large group of researchers from various disciplines as well as representatives of cultural institutions and NGOs from all over Poland to the hospitable Staszic Palace in Warsaw. The number of people present ranged from 22 to 36 people, and sometimes there were not enough chairs in the room to accommodate everyone. Apart from the participants from Warsaw the seminars were attended by guests from Białystok, Gdańsk, Kraków, Lublin, Łódź, Olsztyn, Toruń and Wrocław. They represented such institutions as: the L. Zamenhoff Centre in Białystok, the Gdańsk Museum, the Dobra Wola Foundation from Kraków, the 'Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre' in Lublin, the State Archives in Olsztyn, the 'Remembrance and Future' Centre in Wrocław. Representatives of the Pilecki Institute, the Warsaw branch of the Institute of National Remembrance, the Karta Center and the Centre of Community Archives were also present. This list of attendees shows how diverse the group of participants was, what precisely reflects the nature of oral history practised both in the academy and beyond.

The proposed formula (borrowed from biographical sociologists from Łódź) worked well, although the specificity of oral history requires looking for new ways of dealing with interviews. An innovation we introduced during the seminars was an option to analyse various forms of interview recordings, not only transcripts, but also audio and video. Whenever possible, we suggested that participants read the interview transcript first and then listen/watch the interview. Those people who did this pointed out how much the voice or image influenced the interpretation, sometimes changing its meaning. However, text remains the basic material for analysis – also because it enables us to quickly explore the content of a conversation lasting sometimes several hours. We also pointed out how important it is that this transcript is made carefully and captures as accurately as possible the way the person being recorded speaks, along with his/her linguistic slips, silences and emotions accompanying the narration – something that no software can display. It is also necessary to use appropriate markers that guide a reader to understand a story; here, we recommended the use of the code employed by biographical sociologists.

At the first meeting, an interview by the author of this report was taken to the stage. We analysed an account recorded in the project entitled *Wyłom w systemie. Firmy polonijne 1976–1994* (A breach in the system. Polonia Firms 1976–1994) carried

1 See J. Gałęziowski, *Czas na analizę! O potrzebie seminariów historii mówionej*, 'Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej,' vol. 12, 2022, pp. 226–246.

out at the University of Warsaw and the University of Vienna.[2] The interview with a representative of one of the Polonia Firms had been conducted in December 2021. During the seminar I briefly introduced the topic of the project, talked about the narrator and the interview situation, and then after the Q&A session, everyone had the opportunity to comment on the text they had read (only the transcript was made available). A longer discussion emerged on the relationship between researcher and researched, especially in situations where it is more difficult to sympathize with the interviewee. As a result, there was not enough time for a detailed analysis of the content of the interview.

In February, we worked with an interview from Maria Buko's collection of biographical accounts of the children of former concentration camps' prisoners. The recording had been registered as part of her doctoral project *Pamięć i doświadczenie potomków polskich nieżydowskich więźniów nazistowskich obozów koncentracyjnych w kontekście polityki pamięci w Polsce* (Memory and experience of descendants of Polish non-Jewish prisoners of Nazi concentration camps in the context of the politics of memory in Poland), carried out in 2017–2021. These interviews, most of them archived in the Oral History Archive at the History Meeting House, were published in a book entitled *Pogłosy. Dzieci więźniów niemieckich obozów koncentracyjnych* (Reverberations/Postvoices.[3] Children of prisoners of German concentration camps).[4] The analysed account was recorded at the very end of the project and was not included in the book; the narrator came from a mixed family – her father was Polish, a prisoner of one of the concentration camps in the Third Reich, and her mother was German, who saved his life. This time, the Q&A session was mostly focused on ethical issues, and a lot of attention was paid to comparing the text with the audio recording.

The third seminar slightly differed, as it embodied the postulate not only to cover interviews from ongoing projects, but also to reach out to those conducted years ago, and now available in the oral history archives. We retrieved two interviews from the IFiS PAN Qualitative Data Archive/Social Data Repository. These were interviews from a project by Prof. Antonina Kłoskowska entitled *Kultury narodowe u korzeni* (National cultures at the grass-root level).[5] We selected two interviews (with a woman and a man) from the collection. Both were recorded in 1992 by (then) Dr. Izabella Bukraba-Rylska in villages located on the Polish–Belarussian border. Unlike during previous seminars, guests interested in participating in the seminar had to independently download the material for analysis (typescript

2 The project is conducted within the framework of a Mozart grant, NCN/FWF, 2021–2024.

3 The word '*pogłosy*' has a double meaning in Polish (editors note).

4 M. Buko, *Pogłosy. Dzieci więźniów niemieckich obozów koncentracyjnych*, Warszawa 2020.

5 The results of this research were published, inter alia, in the book by Prof. Kłoskowska under the same title: A. Kłoskowska, *Kultury narodowe u korzeni*, 2nd edition, Warszawa 2023. See also: Antonina Kłoskowska, *National Cultures at Grass-Root Level*, Budapest 2000.

scans) from the Social Data Repository (https://rds.icm.edu.pl/). Prof. Izabella Bukraba-Rylska listened to the discussion and at the end answered some questions as well as commented on the interpretations. This was particularly valuable because, by reaching back into her own memory, she was able to explain issues that were incomprehensible to us. In many other cases, however, it is impossible to reach the people who conducted some of the interviews. It sometimes happens that interviews are not properly and precisely processed, e.g. the interview situation is not described (also what occurred of the record), access to the content is also limited. We will certainly try to access such collections in the future to rely only on what has been archived and make interpretations on that basis.

The fourth meeting was an opportunity to use three forms of the same narrative: audio, video and transcription. However, most participants skipped the audio version in favour of the image. The video interview with a physician in Olsztyn was part of a collection of twenty accounts by the pioneers of post-war medicine in Warmia and Masuria. The collection is available in the State Archives in Olsztyn and presented at the Audiovisual History Archive of Warmia and Masuria (www.ahawim.pl). Ewelina Gołębiowska, who conducted most of the interviews in this project (together with Jan Zygmunt Trusewicz), talked about its objectives and results. The issue of having interviews conducted by two people and possibility of analysing the video with the transcript provoked a lively discussion.

At the last seminar in May, we analysed an interview with an employee of the Polish State Railways (PKP), conducted by Marcin Jarząbek as part of his project *Praca na PKP w 2 połowie XX i początku XXI wieku* (Work in Polish State Railways in the second half of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century). The recorded interviews, although autobiographical in nature, focus primarily on the professional work of the interviewees. Among them were employees at various ranks and from various railway divisions. The chosen interviewee was a female employee of the commercial department of PKP in Wałbrzych. According to the researcher, her account captures accurately the specificity of women's experience of working on the railway from the 1970s to the 1990s. What was interesting, however, was how professional work and private life was integrated. Especially in communist Poland it was impossible to split these two realities. During the meeting, we also talked about the role of gender when conducting interviews and its impact on the meaning.

At the end, participants were asked to complete evaluation questionnaires (it was also possible to do this using an online form), where they were asked, among other things, about the formula of the meetings, what they liked about them, and what they would change in the future. The 24 responses show that the seminars were positively welcomed and fulfilled their basic purpose: firstly, they gathered a large group of participants who want to meet regularly to talk about interviews and learn from each other (also about research practice and how deal with various ethical issues). This was facilitated by the friendly atmosphere during each session.

Oral History Seminars have become a platform for representatives of various circles, communities, institutions, and people, only some of whom are seen only at the annual workshops organised by the Polish Oral History Association (PTHM). The integrative and social functions of these seminars were raised in corridor talks and then confirmed in surveys: we need to meet and talk about what we do, but sometimes professional support is necessary. This particular need was also recognised by Polish Oral History Association, and therefore, the annual workshop focused on supervision in oral history.

The door was opened to theoretical and methodological discussions – how to go beyond the mere opinions, whether someone liked the interview or not and other such vague generalisations. Our intuition has been confirmed, i.e. that there is no coherent concept of how the analysis of oral history interviews should look like, and whether such a concept can be developed; or maybe a given interview should simply be analysed in the frame of the discipline represented by the researcher, and he or she could take from the analysed material what he or she needs for own research? This was the scenario indicated by the methodological seminars that took place last year in Łódź, Warsaw and Wrocław.[6] They confirmed that the milieus of sociologists and historians are separate, although we are able to meet and to exchange our experiences and learn from each other. Thus, to what extent is it possible to cross disciplinary boundaries in oral history? Is it possible to create one interdisciplinary method of interview analysis? What does it mean that an interview is a historical source, and how should an analysis of such a source look like? These questions will certainly accompany us in the next series of Oral History Seminars, which will be continued in the 2023/2024 academic year, in the same place (Staszic Palace, Warsaw) and time (every fourth Wednesday of the month except December, 1:30 p.m.– 6:00 p.m.). Among the narrators will be a displaced person, an LGBTQ+ person, a female scientist and a filmmaker. The program is available on the PTHM website as well as on Facebook. Submissions and questions can be sent to: seminaroralhistory@gmail.com.

6 This concerns a series of three seminars entitled: *Socjologia biograficzna a historia mówiona w Polsce (przegląd dobrosąsiedzkich stosunków)* [Biographical sociology and oral history in Poland (a review of good neighbourly relations]). They took place in November 2022 and addressed the following issues: 1) What (really) happens between the meeting with a person and the production of an academic text? 2) What is biographical sociology about; what is oral history about? 3) What past does oral history re/construct and why? The organisers of this event were: the Biographical Research Section of the Polish Society of Social Sciences, the Centre for Biographical Research and Oral History of the University of Łódź, the IFiS PAN Qualitative Data Archive, the 'Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej,' the 'Remembrance and Future' Centre and the Polish Oral History Association.