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Report on the Oral History Seminars (second edition)

DOI: 10.26774/wrhm.422
Originally written in Polish, translated by Karl Bernhardt / Language Room.

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During the 2023/2024 academic year, the Oral History Seminars – an initiative of the Polish Oral History Association and the Qualitative Data Archive at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences – continued successfully. Eight sessions were held between October and May, bringing together researchers from various disciplines as well as oral history practitioners from a range of organizations and cultural institutions across Poland. As in the pilot seminars, each seminar lasted approximately four hours, typically focusing on the analysis of one interview presented in audio or video form alongside its transcription (with one exception).

At the first meeting, Alina Doboszewska presented an interview from the "Memory and Oblivion" project, which was carried out by a Polish–Ukrainian–German team. The project explored the postwar sociocultural changes in Hausdorf/Jugów, located in the Polish Góry Sowie (Owl Mountains). It was implemented by a consortium of several organizations as part of the "Geschichtswerkstatt Europa" program, supported by the German foundation "Memory, Responsibility, and Future." It was a group interview with two female interviewers and two female interviewees. Additional individuals were also present, including a camera operator, interpreters, and the daughter of one of the interviewees. Both interviewees had relocated to Jugów from areas of today's western Ukraine, which, before the Second World War, had been part of Poland. They had been deported to the Soviet Union (Komi Republic) and were repatriated to Poland in 1946. During the seminar, we discussed the advantages and challenges of group interviews, particularly when multiple interviewees or interviewers are involved. In this case, the video recording was crucial for interpreting the session, capturing not only the conversation but also the emotions and dynamics that unfolded during the meeting.

A month later, we entered into the world of cinema through a narrative presented by film critic Tomasz Raczek. His account, recorded for the Oral History Archive of the Museum of Cinematography in Łódź, sparked a discussion about interviews with public figures, particularly those meant for broad audiences. As Anna Michalska, the interviewer, pointed out, an important factor to consider when analysing such narratives is that these individuals, in a way, "professionally create new worlds and captivate through storytelling." Consequently, the level of narrative construction is often much higher than in interviews with so-called ordinary people.

In December, we analysed an interview in which the narrator focused primarily on his sexual orientation, in contrast to the protagonist from the previous meeting, who was also a self-identified gay man but discussed other aspects of his life.

The interview came from the collection *Oral History of the LGBT+ Community in Poland*, a project by the Lambda Warsaw Association in collaboration with the History Meeting House. As Adriana Kapała, the project coordinator and interviewer, noted, many of these conversations centred around psychosexual orientation, making them less typical biographical interviews and more focused on identity. During the meeting, we discussed several ethical issues related to interviewing individuals from minority groups, as well as broader challenges in reaching out to such communities. It became clear that being part of the community can facilitate building trust and establishing connections. The two interviews, from November and December, illustrated how the interview's design and context can shape its narrative – one emphasizing on professional life, the other exploring psychosexual identity.

In January, Tomáš Pavlíček and Barbora Kulawiaková presented an interview recorded for the project "Czechoslovak–Polish scholarly entanglements in the cold war: between high politics and individual strategies." The project aims to demonstrate that numerous connections between scholars existed and were highly valued as an essential part of academic work, often outside the official channels of exchange between universities or academies of science. The researchers focus on scientists whose most significant contributions occurred in the second half of the 20th century. The project also examines the gender dynamics in academic training, particularly the extent to which the officially proclaimed equality of women was reflected in their hiring and participation in international scientific congresses. These issues arose in the interview with Prof. Zofia Adamowicz, a prominent figure in Polish mathematical logic at the Institute of Mathematics of the Polish Academy of Sciences. While the interview primarily focused on her academic career, aspects of her personal life also emerged. We speculated whether her gender might have influenced this shift, making it one of our central interpretations.

In February and March, we focused on Jewish topics. During the first meeting of the summer semester, we explored the Jewish community of Białowieża, particularly its prewar and wartime history, as seen through the eyes of Polish observer Jan Buszko. He witnessed the liquidation of the Białowieża ghetto and shared his memories during the annual memorial gathering dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust. Katarzyna Winiarska, the creator of the Virtual Museum of Jewish History in Białowieża (www.jewish-bialowieza.pl), later recorded an interview with him, which we analysed during the seminar. The interview was not biographical but thematic, more akin to a journalistic investigation, prompting a discussion about this type of source material, which is often created as part of various projects. Ultimately, we unanimously agreed that biographical interviews offer a deeper understanding of the subject matter, while these types of thematic interviews help uncover unknown facts.

The following month, we shifted our focus to Lublin, where we gained insight into the life story of Anna Mass, recorded as part of the "Oral History" program

at the "Grodzka Gate – NN Theater" Center. Wioletta Wejman presented her interview with Mass (2013), along with three earlier interviews recorded for the Oral History Archive of the KARTA Center and History Meeting House (2011), the Centropa Archive (2005), and the USC Shoah Foundation/Visual History Archive (1996). We had a unique opportunity to compare accounts given by the same person over nearly two decades, which allowed us to examine both the content and the visual aspects, as some recordings were on video. This case sparked a discussion about analysing multiple accounts from one individual at different stages of their life, particularly in relation to historians' frequent concerns about the reliability of sources. The interview was complemented by a walk around Lublin with the interviewer, which helped evoke additional memories.

In April, we discussed an account from a member of the landed gentry. We analysed an interview with Maria Orkisz, who was born during the occupation in a palace near Kraków but has lived in a Kraków apartment since the end of the war, like many landed gentry families forced to relocate to cities. The interview came from a collection of landed gentry narratives recorded by Marcin Chorązki, who focuses on the fate of this group of people. His latest project explores the postwar experiences of landed gentry in socialist Poland and after 1989. During the meeting, we reflected on the distinctive characteristics of landed gentry narratives, as well as interviews with people from different social classes, and how background influences one's ability to relate narratives.

This theme also resurfaced during the final meeting of the academic year. In May, we explored the topic of "Poles in the East." Dominik Czapigo, coordinator of the long-running project and author of the publication *Polacy na Wschodzie. Historie mówione* (Poles in the East: Oral Histories), selected two interviews from the extensive collection of recordings made by the KARTA Center between 2006 and 2011. The interviews were markedly different in many ways: one with Zofia Jarosz from Łyntupy (2009, recorded by Magdalena Stopa) and the other with Eugeniusz Cydzik (2007, recorded by Jarosław Palka in Lviv). These differences – encompassing gender, origin, education, and place of residence (rural vs. urban, and locations now in two different countries: Belarus and Ukraine) – affected not only the length and narrative density of the interviews but also highlighted both the richness and the challenges of working with such material. Several project participants who had conducted interviews themselves attended the meeting, allowing us to evaluate the project's objectives, interview methodology, and the analytical potential of the entire collection, which comprises nearly 1,100 recordings.

As evident from the report, the material for analysis was extremely diverse in almost every respect. The interviews included both women and men, representing different social classes and professions, and living in both urban and rural areas. Methodologically, the interviews varied as well, with both biographical and thematic approaches of different lengths. We examined interviews conducted by

international teams and even one involving multiple participants. This diversity allowed us to explore interview methodologies suited to different research projects or archival needs, while also raising important ethical issues.

The structure of the meetings remained consistent with that of previous editions, although the interpretation methods varied based on the participants and their disciplinary backgrounds. Each person contributed their unique perspective and skills, yet we did not arrive at a single model of analysis. The ability to view interviews from multiple perspectives that can inspire each other once again highlights the richness of the discipline.

We plan to continue this work in the next academic year. The strong interest in participating in the seminars reassures us that analysing interviews together is worthwhile, while also creating a space for networking and mutual support. As usual, we will meet on Wednesdays at 2 p.m. at the Staszic Palace in Warsaw. The annual meeting schedule is available on the Polish Oral History Association's website. We invite everybody who is interested in joint analysis to join us in discovering oral histories together!