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Report on the international conference *Oral History in Wartime: Academic Knowledge and the Researcher's Responsibility*

DOI: 10.26774/wrhm.421
Originally written in English.

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From 13 to 15 June 2024, oral historians and memory researchers from Ukraine, but also other countries, such as Canada, Poland, Germany, the UK, Switzerland, Czechia, Slovakia, the US, and Ireland, had the unique opportunity to meet at the above conference in Uzhhorod, Ukraine. Discussions were held at the conference on matters of ethics, professionalism, and scholarly integrity when conducting oral history research during war. The event was organised by the Ukrainian Oral History Association, in partnership with the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Alberta, Uzhhorod National University, the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance, the Transcarpathian Museum of Folk Architecture and Life, and the Borderland Research and Development Centre.

After the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Ukrainian Oral History Association temporarily dispersed. Some of its members went abroad; those who remained in the country had to face the difficult conditions of war or occupation. Despite this, the Association overcame initial difficulties and very quickly took up further work, organising both online and on-site activities, for security reasons initially outside Ukraine, especially in Poland ("Witnessing the War in Ukraine" – Summer Institute, the third edition of which was held this year).

It should be noted here that with the full-scale aggression in Ukraine there has been a veritable eruption of documentation related to the war, including the recording of oral histories. With reference to the name of the symposiums organised by the Lviv Center for Urban History, it can be said that this is "the most documented war." This phenomenon has also considerably led to the intensification of the Ukrainian Oral History Association's activities. It used to organise regular oral history conferences in Ukraine and now, at last, after a long break, it has managed to organise another conference on Ukrainian territory. It has also provided an opportunity for participation for those Ukrainian researchers who, for various reasons, cannot travel abroad to participate in international scholarly life. The main goal of the Uzhhorod conference was to draw attention to ethical issues and the safety of oral history researchers and to teach educators how to work, collect, archive, and disseminate oral history material during wartime. The discussions were held alternately in two languages: Ukrainian and English.

The beautiful historical town of Uzhhorod is located away from the theatre of warfare, which, however, could not be forgotten as a result of the occasional sound of anti-aircraft alarms. The first day of the conference was free flowing, starting with a tour of the open-air museum, organised by partner: the Transcarpathian Museum of Folk Architecture and Life. This was followed by two more agenda items that set the scene for the rest of the conference's work. The first was a panel

discussion *Challenges and tasks of oral history* led by the organisers: Gelinada Grinchenko, Natalia Khanenko-Friesen, Svitlana Makhovska, Tetiana Pryvalko, and Pavlo Lenio.

The discussion first and foremost highlighted the difference between the scientific standard of oral history and other initiatives, widely disseminated since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. During the war, the emphasis is on documentary stories and materials that convey the essence of the current situation. Documentarians thus emphasise the study of the "unfinished past." Oral history researchers, on the other hand, conduct in-depth and long-term research, positioning events in terms of memory, processes, and social phenomena. These two approaches are now intersecting, with unexpected results.

Another issue raised were the ethics and safety of research. This is a particularly sensitive topic during wartime. Various issues involving communication with people who are living through difficult experiences were raised: the choice of interview questions and how to ask them, the limits of the researcher's responsibility for the life and psychological well-being of the interviewee, the researcher's dilemmas and choices regarding the extent and uses of the information obtained, and ensuring the safety not only of the interviewees but also of the researcher, especially if working with military personnel. An example of the methods of publishing the results of oral history research during wartime are the projects of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, in which the staff constantly collaborate with their narrators and, regardless of whether or not written consent has been obtained, still consult each time the material is published.

A highlight of the conference was the keynote address from eminent Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli. He presented a lecture entitled *On the uses of memory*. Referring to his own research and life experiences, as well as examples from common history, he argued that memory is crucial to our self-awareness because it builds vision and perception. It is the tireless work of tracing the past directed towards the future. Cultivating memory allows us to make important decisions, although these can have both positive and negative consequences.

After a slow but constructive initial introduction, the next two days were very busy, filled with a multitude of issues. Proceedings were held in two parallel series of sessions. The most striking feature was their multi-dimensional approach to oral history. Different optics, endless questions, and a dynamic intellectual space created an extraordinary atmosphere of community and mutual exchange of ideas, experiences, and views. Panels explored a variety of oral history topics relating to the war: *Oral history: between theory and practice* (Albert Venher, Natalia Otrishchenko, Liana-Maria Blicharska), *An oral history of displaced persons' experiences* (Natalia Khanenko-Friesen, Qianrui Hu, Nataliya Borys; Katarzyna

Krakowska, Inna Manchak, Kateryna Petrova, Alexander Mušinka), *Oral history of military resistance* (Serhii Adamovych, Iryna Skakalska, Andrii Levchuk, Halyna Bodnar), *Women's history of war* (Larysa Hayduk, Oksana Khomiak, Iryna Savchenko), *Emotions and war* (Oksana Ferents, Iurii Iriohlu, Svitlana Telukha), *Childhood and war* (Viktoriia Nesterenko, Carl Mirra, Olena Hryn), *The researcher as (co)creator of an oral history narrative* (Ihor Lyman, Oksana Kuzmenko, Nataliia Petrova), *The (un)spoken experience of war* (Iryna Koval-Fuchylo, Nadiia Pastukh, Pavlo Lenio), and *Experience on the edge* (Volodymyr Shelukhin, Anna Prokhorova, Tina Polek, Tatiana Vagramenko). There was also a space dedicated to oral history makers at the local level – both researchers and activists from different parts of Ukraine who presented their work on the topic *Regional narratives of war* (Maryna Demediuk, Olha Vorobey, Mykhailo Krasikov).

In addition to the panels presenting particular studies and methodological discussions, two workshops were held. The workshop *Oral history of the war and educational practices in the context of war* brought together representatives of the Junior Academy of Sciences and educators from different educational institutions in Ukraine to discuss the risks and challenges of working with complex topics of oral history in schools (Nina Avramenko, Olena Kazakova, Lesia Khlypavka). The workshop *Archiving war testimonies* addressed what is currently the most urgent problem, that is the overproduction of collected testimonies and the (in)feasibility of their processing and safe preservation (Natalia Khanenko-Friesen, Anatolii Khromov, Ihor Poluektov, Tetiana Yemelianova, Tetiana Pryvalko, Serhii Bilivnenko).

Finally, it is worth mentioning the important contribution of the Polish Oral History Association (POHA), which has supported the Ukrainian Oral History Association from the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion. During the Uzhhorod conference, POHA organised two panels. The first, involving Marcin Jarząbek, Karolina Żłobecka, and Małgorzata Łukianow, and moderated by Alina Doboszewska, entitled *From the first world war to the Russian invasion of Ukraine – the Polish experience of documenting war* presented how Polish oral history worked with war witness testimonies and its use in both academic work and exhibition and museum work.

The second panel, the very impressive roundtable *And for the war to end – Ukrainian Roma oral histories as part of the oral history and testimonies of displacement within and from Ukraine*', was organised by Monika Szewczyk in cooperation with the "Unequal citizenship and transnational mobilisation of Polish, Czech, and Ukrainian Roma in the face of the war in Ukraine (ROCIT)' international research team. The session was moderated by Ignacy Jóźwiak and the panelists included Monika Szewczyk, Elżbieta Mirga-Wójtowicz, and Tetiana Storozhko from the Centre of Migration Research at Warsaw University, and Marketa Hajska, Krisztina Kulcsar,

and Dana Hruškova from the Charles University, Prague. The discussion centred around the film *And for the war to end*, which was based on the oral testimonies of Ukrainian Roma fleeing the war to Poland, and its message was reinforced by the testimonies of Roma refugees from Ukraine in the Czech Republic. Documenting and taking into account the experiences of Ukrainian Roma not only contributes to raising awareness of the diversity of Ukrainians fleeing the war but also allows for a more comprehensive picture of Ukrainian society's experience of forced displacement, including the most vulnerable members of the community.

The conference in Uzhhorod demonstrated the great potential, both scientific, educational, and organisational, of Ukrainian oral history as led by the Ukrainian Oral History Association. Exploiting this potential is very important not only for Ukraine itself and its identity, which is being reconstructed under dramatic conditions, but also for the European community as a whole. Ukrainians are raising fundamental questions about essential social and cultural values and every individual life, using oral history in a completely new and unexpected way, forcing us to rethink its meanings and methodological challenges.