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The Icelandic Centre for Oral History: Collection, Preservation, Research, Growth

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The importance of oral history as an historical method has been steadily growing for the past decades. The same goes for the field of audiovisual archiving. Iceland is no exception to this international development and oral sources are being created at a growing rate as technological advances have made them an attractive option for historians and other academics. Until recently however, access to existing oral sources on Icelandic history was limited by the fact that no Icelandic institution or museum focused specifically on their collection and preservation. The only catalogued and easily accessible collection of oral sources was the Folkloric Collection of the Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies. This changed in 2007 when the growing interest in oral history led to the foundation of the Oral History Centre of the National Library.

The role of the Centre is twofold. As an archive the Centre aims to collect and preserve oral sources on Icelandic history and heritage and to make its collections accessible to both scholars and the public. Furthermore the Centre actively encourages the use of oral sources along with the promotion of oral history as a history method. This article chronicles the history

of the Centre and presents an outline of the Centre's functions, both as an audiovisual archive and as a Centre for oral history.

About the Centre

For the first 5 years The Icelandic Centre for Oral History was run independently as a collaborative unit of four academic institutions: The National and University Library of Iceland, The History Institute of the University of Iceland, The School of Education and RIKK – Institute for Gender, Equality and Difference, University of Iceland. Collaboration began in the spring of 2005 and a formal contract was signed in June 2006. In August two historians were hired to prepare the establishment of the Centre¹. They worked for six months under the auspices of a steering group that included one representative from each of the founding institutions². It should be noted that Guðmundur Jónsson, history professor at the University of Iceland, played a key role in bringing the four institutions together and has led the work of the Centre, as a Managing Director from 2007–2012, when the Centre became a part of the National Library and headed the work of the steering group, and later the advisory board from 2007–2015³.

One of the first tasks of the preparation team was mapping the scope and quantity of oral sources in museums and archives all around the country. It was already known that a significant amount of material was to be found in the possession of private parties such as historians, ethnographers, anthropologists, biographers and journalists. This was done by contacting Icelandic parties where such material might be found. In total 72 museums and institutions were contacted, including all Icelandic local history museums and regional archives. The results from this survey showed that the collections of Icelandic

¹ The author of this article was one of those two historians and the Centre's project manager from 2007–2009, since 2015 also a member of the Centre's advisory board. Much of the information and insight presented in this article is gained directly from the author's work for the Centre.

² See: Samstarfsnefnd um undirbúning að stofnun Miðstöðvar munnlegrar sögu, 2007, *Skýrsla um undirbúning að stofnun Miðstöðvar munnlegrar sögu*, Miðstöð munnlegrar sögu, Reykjavík (Raport on preparing the Centre for Oral History), Reykjavík, p. 3.

³ See about "Miðstöð munnlegrar sögu" (the Centre for Oral History) on the website of the University of Iceland, http://sagnfraedistofnun.hi.is/midstod_munnlegrar_sogu (accessed November 27, 2015).

museums held a surprising amount of oral sources or at least about 3000 hours of material. In most cases access to this material was problematic. Only a small part of this material had been properly catalogued so in general it was difficult for potential users to decide whether a recording would contain relevant information or not. In some cases the material was stored on a medium that was in a state of physical decay and could therefore not be accessed without risk. In other cases obsolete formats complicated access. Few museums had the technical means necessary to access material stored on obsolete formats and to transfer them onto newer and more easily accessible formats. They also often lacked the financial means to ensure correct storage environments and thus preservation. In their replies to the future Centre, many of these parties declared an interest in working with the Centre in order to remedy the situation and cooperate towards the twofold goal of ensuring the safeguarding of the oral sources in their collections and of providing easy access to them⁴.

Another important part of the preparation work was to shape a model that would best serve the goals of the future Centre. The preparation team gathered information about how other archives and institutions that focused on oral sources and oral history conducted their work and built on this information to make suggestions about procedures for the acquisition of materials, preservation, documenting, cataloguing, describing and management of the collections.

A visit was made to the department of oral history in the British Library to learn about collection management and preservation principals. Visits for the same purpose were also made to The Literary Archives of the Finnish Literature Society (SKS) in Helsinki, the Folklore archives of the Danish Royal Library in Copenhagen and The State Media Archive in the Danish State and University Library, also in Copenhagen. The information and insight gained from these visits proved very useful for the preparatory work. In addition one of the historians on the preparation team attended a workshop on Oral History held by the British Library and the Oral History Society.

The team also looked into legal concerns regarding copyright and collaborated with the steering group on a code of ethics. This code was intended to guide the work of the Centre itself and also to be offered as general recommendations regarding the practice of oral history within the Icelandic academia.

⁴ Samstarfsnefnd..., p. 7–8.

The Centre for oral history was formally opened on January 26th 2007. To celebrate the occasion the Centre organized a conference on oral history. Speakers came from Iceland and other parts of Scandinavia, including Dr. Lauri Harvilahti, the Director of the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society, and Britta Bjerrum Mortensen from the Folklore archives of the the Danish Royal Library. The Centre's website⁵ was launched the same day along with an exhibition presenting material from the Centre's collection, where visitors could listen to recordings and learn about oral history as a historical method. The events attracted a large audience of both academics and students and ignited a discussion about the condition of oral history in Iceland⁶.

The Centre's office has from the beginning been located in the National Library. Daily work in the Centre is carried out by one employee, with additional specialists and students being hired to work on particular projects when the budget allows. The Centre has from the start reached out to both students and academics and its services soon began to attract those who were interested in working with oral sources.

The Icelandic Centre for Oral History became a part of the National Library in 2012. The steering group became an advisory board that participates in strategic decisions, gives advice on collection projects, and supports in obtaining the additional funding for particular projects⁷. This organizational change secured the long-term financing of the Centre and cemented a binding commitment by the educational authorities to promote research in oral history and the preservation of oral history material.

⁵ See: www.munnlegsaga.is (accessed November 27, 2015).

⁶ Samstarfsnefnd..., p. 3. At the time of writing the Centre's advisory board consists of Guðni Th. Jóhannesson (representative of the History Institute of the University of Iceland), Örn Hrafnkelsson (representative of the National Library) and Unnur María Bergsveinsdóttir (representative of the Icelandic Historians Association). See: <http://munnlegsaga.is/index.php?page=adstandendur> (accessed November 27, 2015).

⁷ See: http://sagnfraedistofnun.hi.is/midstod_munnlegrar_sogu (accessed November 27, 2015).

The Centre as an audiovisual archive

The Centre collects all the materials on Icelandic history and heritage. It is now hold about 800 hours of digital material in 124 collections. Audio recordings constitute the major part of the material in the Centre's archive but few of them do hold extensive interviews on audiovisual formats. 90 collections are accessible online (in whole or in part). The Centre's archival materials include also photographs, notes, partial or full transcripts and other personal sources obtained at the time of making of the recording. In addition to the already developed materials the archive holds several hundred hours of recordings in analogue format. These are now being transferred to digital files and catalogued.

Even though the first audiovisual archives came into existence about a century ago, it is only in the second half of the 20th century, when inexpensive tape recorders became easily available and that these collections began to grow at a steady pace⁸. At the same time the audiovisual archiving has faced rapid technological changes. Formats have evolved from the analogue to multiple digital ones. Carriers of data have changed. Cataloguing, along with access, has also moved into the electronic realm. In the 1990s the need for audiovisual archivists to develop a common theoretical and methodological approach became obvious. In 1998 UNESCO published the first edition of its guide, *Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy and Principles*⁹, which presents guidelines, intending to synthesize the views of professionals on that field. In accordance with these international guidelines the Icelandic Centre emphasizes the importance of careful documentation and inventory. Material is catalogued and described using archival-based concepts and rules. Precise records are important, not only concerning the origin and context of each document, but also the management of the archives. This information includes the original data carrier's location in the archive, its condition, action taken to restore or repair original data carrier and the transfer of analogue documents into digital formats. The program used for cataloguing and describing the collections is *Access to memory*, which is maintained and supported by the ICA (International Council on Archives) and the work is done according to the ISAD(G) standard (General International Standard Archival

⁸ R. Edmondson, *Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy and Principles*, Paris 2004.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

Description). Cataloguing and describing has been focused on those areas of the collection where the demand has been perceived to be greatest.

The process of obtaining the oral history recordings is a very important part of the registration process and a necessary first step in the cataloguing. The Centre operates within a framework of contractual and copyright law. An accession contract or agreement on the transfer of archival materials is made for each acquisition, stating the voluntary transferring of the collection to the Centre, without any financial consideration. This contract permits the Centre to authorize the use of the material by a third party and is the most important and most often used agreement when it comes to audiovisual archives¹⁰.

The storage facilities of the National Library meet all standards for storing fragile archival materials. When analogue acquisitions are acquired the original data carrier is always conserved and its content is transferred onto digital format, what ensures future access. The new backup copy is identical to the original and its content is not modified in any way.

The Collections

The content of the Centre's collection is very diverse as the Centre gathers all oral sources on Icelandic history and heritage. In first years of activity the Centre received a great amount of materials in analogue format, from those who had such oral sources in their possession and wanted to secure their existence or give an access to them. Most of this came from individuals, for example historians who had recorded interviews on diverse topics in their research work. The Centre was also contacted by individuals from all over the Iceland who had conducted interviews to preserve the history of places and local communities, life stories of individuals or accounts of vanishing customs. Some smaller museums and archives have handed over to the Centre's collections the old analogue recordings in return for digital copies for their local use. This serves local interests as well as the interests of all those interested in oral sources on Icelandic history and heritage. An example of material gained from such cooperation is a collection of recordings from Minjasafnið á Hnjóti, a local history museum in one of the smallest and most remote communities of Iceland. Also the History

¹⁰ See: "Accessioning", <https://ysuarchive.wordpress.com/archives-policies-2/accessioning/> (accessed November 27, 2015).

Institute of the University of Iceland has chosen to preserve an old analogue material from their archives by handing them over to the Centre in exchange for digital copies.

Most audiovisual archives collect material rather than create it by themselves. The Centre for Oral History in Iceland however actively seeks to create new oral sources. The Centre originated in collaboration between academic research institutions and the National Library, even before its formal opening, initiated research projects, intended to collect and work with personal sources various topics and questions. The advisory board decides what projects are implemented and helps to organize it and finance it. In some cases the Centre hires a historian (or an academic from another discipline) to do the interviews, develop them and present the research results. The Centre also cooperates in projects implemented by other institutions or academics. Below I will present some of them, which built specific collections in our archive.

Project **“Memories from the feminist movement”** focuses on the Icelandic feminist movements of 1965–1980. The idea for the project originated and was developed by RIKK – Institute for Gender, Equality and Difference, and one of the partners was The Icelandic Women’s History Archives. The Centre for Oral History carried out the project and partially financed it. The archival collection contains interviews with 17 women who were active in the women’s movement in that time and who tell about one of the most controversial movements in Icelandic history. The oral history material was summed up in a documentary *Sixteen Red Stockings*. *Sixteen Red Stockings*, mixed with animation, graphics and music and was well received (also awarded for the best Nordic documentary at the Polar Film Festival 2012¹¹).

“Crisis Stories” is a documentary and research project on the events which began in November 2008 and which Icelanders soon started referring to as “The Collapse”. The project was initiated by the Centre, documenting events that were just unfolding. “Crisis Stories” documented a social experience and registered how those events affected personal lives of individuals from different social groups. Special attention was given to the historical and political meaning given by the interviewed individuals to this “Collapse”. It was considered important to collect these personal testimonies while the

¹¹ See: <http://icelandiccinema.com/film/Women-in-Red-Stockings> (accessed November 27, 2015).

events were still taking place and while their consequences and effects still remained to be seen. Interviewees were encouraged to share their view of how the great history influenced their daily lives. The project was carried out between 2008 and 2010 and the collection contains the accounts of over 100 individuals from all over the Iceland. A historian, Magnús Helgason, has already used this sources in his research on the changes in consumer culture and politics in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008.

The Centre has cooperated in two projects concerning **“The Culinary Heritage of Reykjavík”**. Within the first one the Centre collaborated with a local association dedicated to the research the Icelandic culinary heritage, helping to find a qualified interviewer, to structure the project and the interviews and loaning the recording equipment. The interviews focused on culinary traditions and methods and the effects of rapid technological changes and globalization after the World War II. This project culminated in a well-received exhibition about Reykjavík food culture throughout the 20th century. The interviews were an important part of the exhibition and added a personal dimension to the subject. The second project consisted of a series of interviews with members of the Icelandic Chefs Association. In the accounts the chefs gave an overview of their career, with emphasis on how the modern developments in cooking have effected not only their working environment but also the culture of home cooking. These two collections are valuable sources on Icelandic culinary culture, open to all those who wish to explore this part of our heritage.

“The Nobel Laureate and his neighbors” project focuses on the writer Halldór Laxness, Iceland’s only Nobel laureate, who died in 1998. The Centre collaborated on that with Gljúfrasteinn, a museum dedicated to the writer. This institution is located in the valley where writer grew up and later, as an adult, built his family a home. This oral history collection contains interviews with 14 neighbors of his, who remember the writer and talk about their friendships with him. The interviews are meant to add a personal dimension to the presentation of Laxness in the museums and to be a source for future research on the poet and his work along with a daily life in that particular rural location.

The Icelandic Confederation of Labour asked the Centre for the cooperation on making a series of interviews that chronicled **“A Hundred years in the History of the Icelandic Confederation of Labour”**. The Centre prepared Þorgrímur Gestsson, a historian and journalist, to collect the interviews and provided recording equipment. Historian Sumarliði Ísleifsson

then used the material in his research on the history of the confederation and of the social struggle of Icelandic workers. The oral history material is preserved in the Centre's archive, where it is accessible to all interested in it. The interviews have been catalogued and described.

"Memories of Reykjavík" is a collection of interviews conducted in 2007–2009 with about 90 people of different age groups and different parts of the city, who were asked about their everyday life, growing up in Reykjavík, about their household and school life, leisure time, so as their thoughts on their nearest environment and the effects of the dark winters on their lives. In order to reach out to the society the interviews were recorded in a movable recording studio, a small wooden hut that provided good recording conditions. Thanks to that for three years this project was a regular part of Reykjavík's big events like the city's Culture Night and Museum Night. The youngest interviewees were still in kindergarten and the oldest were seniors who described a childhood in a city quite different from the present Reykjavík. Each interviewee received a CD with recording of his or her story, along with a letter of thanks. The purpose of this project was to create a collection of sources concerning the personal experiences and perspective of Reykjavík's citizens on their everyday life in the city. Chosen parts from the interviews have been presented on the National Radio and the interviews are accessible through online streaming. A few secondary school teachers have used certain parts of these interviews as a teaching aid when teaching about Icelandic history and society.

"The first Refugees" project focuses on the experience of a group of Hungarian refugees that arrived in Iceland after the Hungarian revolution in 1956 was crushed. Thanks to the initiative of the Icelandic Red Cross department, a group of 52 refugees arrived to Reykjavík the day before Christmas 1956. This was the first time in history when Icelandic government formally agreed to receive refugees. Later half of this group became Icelandic citizens. When the Centre for Oral History was opened 14 of them were still alive and still living in Iceland. While the story behind this political decision of their migration to Iceland is well documented, very little was known about the personal experience of this group. Considering the risk that their memories would be lost, as the remaining members of this group grew older, the Centre initiated a project to document their story and recorded their accounts.

The importance of access to the collected oral histories was from the beginning an important part of the Centre's vision. Deciding about the best way to provide access for users of the collections was however not a simple task. The integration of the Centre's collections with the National Library's catalogue took a long time for technical reasons. In addition there were legal questions concerning copyrights, but also ethical questions concerning among others the intentions of those who originally created the archival material. Much of the sources in the collections had been created with the intention to be used for future research and studies. In relation to some of them however it was not clear whether their creator had meant to share them with others for any future use. A small part of sources was limited with specific access restrictions agreed between the interviewee and the interviewer, that had to be taken into account.

Since 2015 the whole catalogue of the Centre's oral history collections can be found online and more than two thirds of the resource is directly accessible there (at least partly), by online streaming at www.einkaskjol.is, in the National Library's online catalogue for private papers. All the sources comes with a short description of its content, the names of interviewer and interviewee and with information about the material's origin. Full transcriptions are available just for some of the interviews.

The Centre's advisory board considers this ease of access to be one of the Centre's greatest contributions in the field of oral history in Iceland, as providing those material to public is an efficient way to promote their dissemination and the use of oral history as method.

Dissemination and research

The Centre for Oral History seeks to stimulate discussion on oral sources and oral history, to encourage and facilitate the creation and use of oral sources and to offer information and education on oral history. The Centre's webpage is the starting point for many people who wish to know more about oral history. One can find there articles with the theoretical basics of oral history along with information on practical matters. This includes information about what constitutes good interviewing technique, the selection of recording devices and their proper use and advice on how to seek out and contact interviewees. Furthermore the website presents the Centre's guidelines on how to transcribe and preserve an interview along with the Centre's code of ethics and advice on how to correctly secure the rights of use and preservation.

The Centre offers workshops aimed at all those who are interested in creating and working with oral sources. These workshops cover the basics of oral history as a history method along with an introduction to the use of oral history in Icelandic history research. The participants receive a short training in how to prepare and conduct a successful interview. Finally the workshops explore different methods of how the produced sources can be presented in museums and exhibitions or online. These workshops are based on the methodology and instructions of the British Library and the British Oral History Society.

To stimulate the use of oral history among future scholars the Centre works with the University of Iceland, bringing education about oral sources and oral history into the classroom of students of history, ethnology, anthropology, archeology and more. Teachers from both the History Department and from the Department of Applied Studies in Culture and Communication have chosen to use materials from the Centre's collections to train their students in the making of radio documentaries. The effects have been broadcast by the National Radio. The Centre also works with the School of Education, introducing future teachers to oral history and its many uses in teaching children about their national and local history.

In order to stimulate the academic discussion the Centre regularly organizes and hosts conferences on oral history. The main topics of interest at the Centre's conferences are methodology and ways to use oral sources in the schoolroom.

The Centre provides practical service along with the dissemination of information. Many scholars and students find themselves obliged to resort to interviewing when traditional sources are silent or when the researcher wishes to delve more deeply into particular questions. In order to aid these researchers and encourage the preservation of and access to these sources, the Centre offers visitors advice on the scope and planning of the interviews, along with practical advice. In addition the Centre offers the loan of high quality recording devices, free of charge. The Centre encourages those who make use of these services to get permission from the interviewees for the material to become part of the Centre's collections and in most cases this turns out to be the result.

Finally it should be noted that the Centre seeks to stimulate interest in oral history by actively presenting the interesting contents of its collections to the public. This is done for example by presenting chosen samples of material, along with context, on the Centre's webpage, through collaboration with the National Radio.

The Icelandic Centre for Oral History has now been active for almost a decade and so it is appropriate to conclude the presentation of the Centre by considering how its work has served its goals. As mentioned earlier, facilitating access to oral sources is a very straightforward way to encourage the use of oral sources and oral history. Online access to the Centre's collections serves this goal excellently. Future plans include further transcribing of the accounts and the assignment of keywords, which will make the Centre's collections even more useful. The Centre's very varied projects' subjects are another important contribution, combining collecting materials with the research. Those serve not only to create new sources on Iceland's history and heritage but also help set a standard for working with oral sources and demonstrate varied examples of the opportunities that the use of oral sources offers. It should be noted the Centre's workshops are the only oral history workshops offered in Iceland and judging by attendance they obviously meet an existing demand for this kind of information and training. Finally the conferences the Centre has organized have created a platform for discussion on an academic level. It is apparent to the author that the Centre has stimulated both the production of oral sources about Iceland's history and heritage and the use of oral history as a history method. As a permanent part of the National Library the Centre will without a doubt continue contributing to the field of oral history in Iceland.