

WHY DO WE RECORD FULL LIFE STORY INTERVIEWS?**Dominik Czapigo**

Before answering this question, I want to tell you briefly about the institution I work for. KARTA Center Foundation is a non-governmental organization, which started operating in the underground in the 80s. In all activities undertaken by us - publications (the quarterly magazine "KARTA", books), educational (eg. a program for high school students "History at Hand"), documentation (eg. the programme "Index of Victims of Soviet Repression", Oral History Program), the most important thing for us was always the history as seen by the individuals, their personal experience.

The beginning of our work with oral history methods can be placed in the late 80s, when we first started to record stories of people repressed by the Stalinist regime in the East. The „Eastern Archive” was set up and the stories of almost 1500 people were recorded (at that time, for technological reasons, we used magnetic tapes) and a lot of documents were also gathered. (In 2008-2009 we managed to digitalise this whole set of recordings). Over the years, people who experienced these repressions could not discuss about it; there was no place for their story in the official historiography.

Although oral history as a method of documenting was constantly present in various actions took by KARTA, it was only in 2003 when separate Oral History Programme was established. Since that time we try to gain money directly for projects on recording, archiving, and popularising our collection. The proximate cause for the establishment of the programme was invitation to participate in an international oral history project dedicated to the prisoners of Mauthausen-Gusen cocentration camps, sent to us by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Austria. Since then we put over number of projects - to name bigger: „From individual biographies to European remembrance. International Oral History programme for education about the victims of Nazism and Stalinism” „Forgotten Nazi Camps in Poland”, „Poles in the East”.

In 2005 in Warsaw the History Meeting House was established. The initiator of this act was the KARTA Center. But yet History Meeting House is a municipal institution; it is worth emphasizing because this status has a direct link to the method of financing. It has a fixed budget, and its actions are not entirely dependent on money raised outside, as it is in KARTA's case. The establishment of this institution was an important step toward the professionalisation of our actions (including the possibility to disseminate fruits of our actions). This is a place where our collection is archived and made available to the public. Also with the support of DSH we were able to run the presentation www.audiohistoria.pl, which is supposed to be a showcase for all of our projects - in which

everyone will be able to find basic informations on all our projects and every single recording. This site is supposed to be something wider than the presentations that we sometimes build for particular project – eg. such as "Poles in the East."

Most of the recordings in our collection have audio format. All of them are digitalised but not all of them are fully depicted. Since 2003 we strive to make all of new recordings to be depicted. In 2003 we launched set of standards helping to elaborate the recordings. However, big part of collection recorded in the late 80s and early 90s – „Eastern Archive” already mentioned above but also the „Archive of the Opposition” - still wait to be work out with use of standards launched in 2003. It gives nearly half of the entire collection, which now has more than 3,000 recordings. Process of describing the content of certain recording consists of eight points/steps: 1) data on the recording (date, place, name of interviewer); 2) basic data on the interviewee (name, surname, date and place of birth); 3) short biography of a interviewee; 4) description of the meeting (for example – if anybody else was present during the meeting), the only place where the interviewer can provide his own comments; 5) a detailed description of recording indicating the location (path, minutes) of certain topic; 6) the most interesting parts of the recording as identified by the interviewer (so very subjective); 7) a description of recording with key words; 8) information on Annexes – eg. the number of scanned documents.

In every oral history projects that we've conducted since 2003, we consistently use a biographical interviews. Although each project has a specific topic in the title - for example: forced labor, survivors, we always ask our interviewees to tell us their whole life stories.

In order to succeed with this formula of interview, we should be aware that the first contact with a person then to be recorded is crucial. At this pont we should explicitly stress so we are interested in full life story, not just a selected part of it. Our interlocutors often try to guess why we visit them and what exactly interests us. For instance - when we got their addresses from an association of former prisoners to which they belong, probably they would expect that we want to talk about their experience of being prisoner. Therefore, in first conversation that precedes recording, we should not focus on exact details of our project. Otherwise our interlocutors most likely would try to meet what they think to be our expectations and probably decide that what precedes this certain fragment of biography and what follows it, for us is uninteresting.

We divide our interviews into two parts: the first - free narrative, when the interviewer reduces its presence to a minimum. For technical reasons related to the potential future use of sound fragments, we should not even acquiesce by the "uhm", "aha." etc. In the second part - the interviewer asks a questions that relates to what he already heard, but attempts to stimulate as

lengthy pieces of narratives as possible.

What are the advantages of biographical narratives? **First of all** – they allow our interlocutors to decide on their own on the importance of specific events of their lives. Not because they put them in certain position of narrative - in most cases interlocutors adhere to the chronology of events. More important is how much time they devote to those events and how they relate them to the other moments of their own biographies. However groundbreaking events, among them are traumatic experiences of wartime, occupy a central place in biographies. Not always, however, this is happening, and the only way to find that out is to let our interlocutor to speak. **Second** - let us reach the threads of biography that we would never have discovered, if we would focused only on the chosen topic. This, of course, does not mean that we will get access to every part of biography our interlocutor can recall. Certain things are simply forgotten by the interlocutor at the time of interview but some other are deliberately omitted. Our task is not to act as investigators, who then by all means try to discover these places specially silenced. Just the fact they exist in biographies is very valuable and significant. This in turn leads us to conclusion from which, perhaps, I should have started the whole argument - in our recordings not factography is the most important, but the way people remember. We are convinced that, based on stories entrusted to us, we can not absolutely decide on the facts. This does not mean that we do not believe our interlocutors, but only that we don't focus on facts first and foremost. **Thirdly** - a situation in which someone tells us about his life builds a unique bond between the one who talks and one who listens. Due to this we can get better insight into particular biographies. **Last but not least** advantage of biographical interviews, I want to mention here, is following: a biographical interviews allows us to write a biography of the person and, therefore, a concise presentation of the interlocutor on the occasions of the work related to the dissemination of our collections.

Recording biographical narratives is also related to certain consequences, which some may consider as disadvantages. However, I don't consider them this way. First of all - the recording of such interviews will certainly increase the time needed to carry out specific projects. We need much more time for the recording itself (sometimes even several visits), and then elaborating material. Second - we are assuming much greater responsibility. Full life stories often contain very intimate fragments. That's why further work with those stories and their dissemination to third parties needs much more responsibility.

In the end we can ask the question: whether recording biographical narratives always make sense? In my opinion it's a wrong question; we shouldn't put it that way. I am convinced that it is always worth trying to make such recordings. But at the same time I'm convinced - and I can tell that because of my experience with recording - that not always such a formula is working. Many people are not able to spin freely biographical narratives, and almost from the first moment, it

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appears that they need - let's call it – "constant help". And even though such aid appears, and we ask questions to help our interlocutors to tell their stories, the full interview doesn't exceed – for example- half an hour. It's rather hard to call it a biographical story.