

LIFE INTERVIEWS AS SOURCES FOR HISTORICAL RESEARCH: ARCHIVAL TOOLS, DATABASES AND CONTENT DEVELOPMENTS

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In this year the Oral History Archive (Budapest) which now belongs to the Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution as an independent department will celebrate the 30th anniversary of its foundation. By this time our collection has grown to consist of more than 1000 oral items (interviews) and 1300 written volumes (transcripts with supplements, like memoirs, official documents, newspaper excerpts etc., and biographies. Albeit we aren't an archive in the traditional sense of the word, we host some bequests, as well.

The interviews of our archive are available for both scholarly research and public interest. The catalogue of the collection is accessible via the website of the 1956 Institute. Up till now the full texts of the interviews however have not been made researchable on the Internet for various, also legal reasons, which are deeply rooted in the 1980s when the forms and methodology of our interviewing procedure was formed.

Beginnings

In the Communist period the events of the autumn of 1956 were labelled as counter-revolution and were mentioned by means of distorted evaluations only when it was unavoidable in a chronological narrative. Otherwise the October of 1956 as a revolution, but even the mere number 56 became a taboo issue. When in 1986 in the last year of the secondary school I studied about the contemporary history of Hungary, we were asked by our teacher to bring photos to the history class on the marches, gatherings and other public events of those days and we spoke about the photos instead of retelling the official version of the counter-revolution or speaking openly on the revolt and on its aims.

While the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (the Communist Party) was in power there was no hope that the archives would be opened and a truer history based on facts of the revolution would be constructed one day. There was a strong need to develop other approaches in order to make it possible to build up an accurate picture of the past.

Since all official documentation of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution was kept in strict secrecy, the only source available beyond the propaganda of the regime was the recollections of the participants of the revolutionary events. Two sociologists (András Hegedűs B. and Gyula Kozák) who were dismissed for their underground activities at the very beginning of the 1980s, and the one of which had been imprisoned for having taken part in the reform

movement before the revolution, began to record the recollections of several prominent survivors of the events. Also the idea of founding an institute or research group dedicated to the study of the revolution emerged at that time in underground circumstances.

In 1981, on the 25th anniversary of the 1956 revolution, there was organized a collective interview with nine leading figures of the revolution. The more than one-thousand page long transcribe of the interview has served as a valuable historical document. It contains not only first-hand narratives of the Revolution, but also the analysis that emerged from the talks themselves thanks to the fact that the discussants – among them leading intellectuals—spoke not only as witnesses, but as scholars as well.

Between 1981 and 1985 the above-mentioned two sociologists carried out interviews also with 155 leading managers in industry and business as well as with functionaries of the communist party and of state administration under the auspices of the Research Institute of Economics at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The director of the institute, a prominent party leader and economic reformer who dropped out of influence after the failure of the economic reforms at the beginning of the 1970s, conserved his influence to be able to protect those who were engaged in a delicate field between tolerated and untolerated topics. This project, for example, on the one hand was guided by the hypothesis that the influence of the so-called stalinist model set in Hungary after 1948 remained important throughout communist rule notwithstanding the propaganda of the Kádár era (1956-1989) which tried to distinguish itself as being more liberal, national and rightful. On the other the scholars involved were to study the impacts of the economic reforms of 1968 which were never fully carried out on the managerial class and on their loyalty to party ideology and the political regime.

Methodology

Besides the two pillars of our collection the first half of the 1980s was also the time when the key methods of our interview making and preservation were determined. Throughout this time we have been making full length life interviews. It was chosen to make comprehensive, full-career, or better full-life interviews which shed light also on the family background and the social origins of the interviewees because it was felt that this was the most effective way of illuminating the motivations behind various actions and decisions. So beside digging out historical facts or investigating the interviewees' political career or professional experience we make questions on family background, childhood, schooling and initial socialization. In course of the interviewing we proceed in chronological order starting from the most remote

memories of the family up to the day of the interview. We have a special interest in reconstructing the social network of connections of the interviewee and of his/her family. Consequently our interviews are rather long, they take 10-12 hours on average, but there are some much more extensive. These long recollections cannot be recorded at one time, so we organize a few interviewing sessions, 5-6 with an interviewee. But depending upon the topic under discussion, the extent of the experiences of the person, and his/her willingness to speak a full interview can run even to 10 sessions. One session lasts one and a half, two hours and not more, because it is too exhaustive both for the interviewer and the interviewee and it becomes ineffective over these time limits.

As I indirectly mentioned above our interviewers guide the flow of the interview by making questions. So they take an active part in the interview situation. They may have a pre-set list of questions but they are trained to be an interested listener, too.

Typically we employ part-time interviewers to conduct the interviews. We prefer to recruit for interviewers those who have a knowledge of the field under investigation, who are familiar with the background literature, and who has the personality needed to be an effective and interested listener.

The interviews are usually made at the subject's place of residence and are recorded on audio tape. We prefer to record only sounds because we are convinced that under these circumstances, when people forget about the interview situation in a short time, recollections are more spontaneous while the same people before camera and lamps act a role.

After the interview, the tapes are transcribed verbatim. The transcript is then reviewed by the interviewer to correct the transcription errors, then the text is sent to the person interviewed for his/her review. At this point we urge the interviewee to add important information wherever he/she think it necessary but in the same time we encourage the limitation of revisions to errors of fact in order to maintain the spontaneity of the spoken word. Finally, photos, documents, official papers, and any other materials if available on the interviewee are attached to the interview as supplements.

Among underground circumstances five numbers were made of each interview transcript in order to guarantee the preservation of the text in case of sequestration by the authorities. One was held by the interviewee, an other by the interviewer, a third by the leader of the research, a fourth copy was given by the same project leader to a trustworthy person and a fifth one was deposited in a secret file of the National Library by the complicity of the librarians working there. Nowadays we prepare only three hard copied, one for the interviewee, one for the interviewer and one for the archive where the researchers prefer to study these printed

volumes instead the digitalized files. We also continue to send the interviews to the National Library in digitalized version in order to have a safety copy for all contingencies.

The Oral History Archive

The Oral History Archive (in this name, even it is a little bit misleading, because we make not strictly oral history interviews but life interviews, as I've mentioned) was established in 1985 based on the work made in the preceding five years. In the second half of the eighties, the Archive belonged to the Research Institute for Culture and received financing from the Soros Foundation of Budapest.

Since that time on the interviews of the collection became gradually accessible in accordance with the wish of the interviewees. At the end of the interviewing procedure interviewees are asked to sign an agreement. This agreement allows him/her to decide about the openness of the interview on the basis of what he/she revealed. We use the colours of the traffic light to distinguish the three categories. The green interviews are fully open, the orange are researchable, that is to say accessible but can be cited only with the permission of the interviewee, and the red volumes are closed for a specific period of time. Interviewees may ask to make closed also a determined part of the interview.

The subject of each interview holds the copyright. If and when any part of an interview is published or used in a paper or book, the Archive expects its name to be published.

Our goal is to make our interviews widely available, but we respect the right of the interviewees to close their interviews. It has been our experience that interviewees are much more candid when we make them aware of their rights. While very few choose to close their interview, the right to do so increases the willingness of the subjects to agree to be interviewed.

Methods, procedure, archival tools, databases, content development

To increase the scholastic value of the archive, the interviews were supplied with some useful research tools: an index, list of abstracts, index of names, résumés.

Index – In a first catalogue system codes were used by categories (like freedom fighter, anti-fascist resistant, emigrant, prominent scientist) to make easier the search in the collection.

List of abstracts – Each abstract contains the name, dates of birth and death, profession, the most important stages of life of the interviewees, whether it is open, their access numbers in the catalogue of the Archive, the date of the interviews, their length, and the name of the interviewers.

Index of names – In order to make it possible for scholars to navigate the vast bulk of interviews held in the Archive, we have created indexes of names appearing in each interview. Every interview has its own index. Included with each name are the person's profession, and relation to the interviewee, as well as the number of the pages that name occurs. We have prepared also a complete index of names that contains all the names found in all the interviews, each with a very brief description. Also with each entry researchers can find in which interviews the name occurs and its rough frequency signed by different number of asterisks.

The 1956 Institute

The Institute for the History of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution was established in 1990, partially based on the work of the Oral History Archive, the work of which is intrinsically linked to the larger scope of research conducted at the Institute. The Institute, an intellectual successor of the Imre Nagy Institute which existed in Brussels between 1959 and 1963 became functionally operative as a public foundation made by the Hungarian government in the spring of 1991. Public financing made possible the systematic development of the collection of the archive, the elaboration of modern archival tools to help the orientation in the collection and the supply of scholarly results based on the interviews for the public.

a. Collections, project

By now the project of gathering the recollections on 1956 has increased to a wider scope. We launch various projects to study the society of post-WWII Hungary.

These special projects have covered freedom fighters in the Revolution, the business and party elite, the intellectual movements of the revolution, political activity of writers between 1953 and 1963, Hungarian minorities living in Slovakia and Romania, the Hungarian diaspora throughout the West. At the end of 1994 we started a new research project titled „Second generations 56ers”. With the 44 interviews our aim was to study the lives of the children of those executed, imprisoned, stigmatized after the Revolution. Through these stories we tried

to illuminate the workings and the changing mentality of the Kádár regime. Another project concerns the so-called socialist towns of the communist period in which the state subsidized a standard of living far above the Hungarian average. After the fall of the regime, those towns lost their special status, state industry collapsed, unemployment sky-rocketed, and the inhabitants of these towns became pauperized. A following project focused on the emigrés. It is well known that after the Revolution more than 180000 people left Hungary. Most of them settled in Western Europe or in the United States. After the fall of the regime several thousand returned often to enjoy the relatively high standard of living that their pensions earned abroad were able to provide in Hungary. Upon their arrival in the West these people had found themselves uprooted and had had to learn new languages, cultures and life-styles. With their return to Hungary they have faced the same difficulties again. The old age of the returnees has made the ordeal of this second transition especially trying. Severe problems, such as depression and suicide were frequent in their case. We recorded their identity problems, motivations, their opinions on the different, western and eastern cultures with 36 interviews. Since 2005 we have had a similar project which concentrated on those who had left Hungary as children, to illuminate their special problems of integration in a new society. 2005 was also the year when we began the project *Other Hungary*. It focused on those considered by the communist regime to be non-conformists who formed mostly in Budapest a certain subculture since the beginnings of the sixties. They consisted mainly of intellectuals and artists. This group was not directly involved in politics, but instead with art, music, science and culture in general. Most of them later did not conform with the regime, they succeeded in retaining their autonomy. Though this subculture doesn't exist any more, its former members have common links to the past: regard for human dignity, freedom, refusal to the pressures of authority. In 2008 one of our colleagues made series of interviews with former actors, directors of Kaposvár Theatre to see the influence of communist cultural policy on the activity of the theatre and on the recruitment of its personnel. And finally our recent project in course collects the remembering of the members of the so called democratic underground highlighting the different networks of friendship, acquaintances, the similarities in their social origins, the various moods of conspiracy, and reprisals they had to face.

b. Databases

At first we registered all the relevant informations regarding the interview items in a library catalogue database developed by our IT expert specifically to satisfy our interests. With this

program TEXTAR researchers could call up all the names, events, dates, organizations, locations – as well as any combinations of these – to be found within any of the interviews entered into the database. We recorded there half a thousand interviews in connection with the Revolution. It was an adequate tool to store important informations in a searchable way on the interviews themselves and on a limited number of events. Contemporary however to the growths of the collection and of our claims to find a way to manage the texts of the interviews themselves in the same system, we had to look for other solutions. The development of the it technology in the last twenty years was fortunately so fast that we could find database softwares corresponding to our demands. Now we use the second generation of an oracle database. It manages long texts and sounds as well. Besides the main descriptive data it comprises the full texts of the interviews, the syllabi of the interviews, the abstracts, the lists of names mentioned in the interview. In the long run we may also add the supplements of the interviews, too. Further we can attach there studies prepared on the basis of the interview and articles, biographies issued on the subject of the interview. Since the collection of photoes of the Institute together with the collection of the Hungarian National Museum which we supply for the public are stored in the same database system, it is possible to link the two, oral and imaginary collections. This database system offers great possibilities, certainly greater than the quantity with wich we (5 persons) can cope. A continuous control and development of the content of the database should be necessary, but at present we lack the financial means for it. This is one of the reasons why we decided not to give free access to the database on our website, while researchers can use it in the archive. The other reason regards our legal limits which are determined by the agreements made with the interviewees. So far we have made agreements which didn't consider the publication on the web of the interviews. Further our subjects in the interview situations have had in mind that they speak to a limited public. In a few cases they might have produced different narratives if they had known that their stories were made public on the Internet. Thus, for example, in the cases of content developments we prepare, we ask the interviewees' permission to cite their recollections. Making new contracts with each of our former interviewees, or with their heirs, would require a huge amount of work of convincing, which again exceeds our personnel's possibilities.

Content developments

Instead of giving the full texts of the interviews which besides the legal problems mentioned above are too long to be easily surveyed, we prefer to prepare content developments.

Private history–1956 and the Kádár period is a social scientific collection that recalls the second half of the 20th century, the 1956 Revolution and the Kádár period. The selected interviews recall what their subjects did during the revolution and during the subsequent period of intellectual resistance, reprisals, years of imprisonment, and difficulties of reintegration after their release. On the other hand, the extracts shed light on the motives of those in power and their interpretations of the revolution, reprisals and consolidation. A couple of the recollections provide a glimpse into the cultural and scientific life of the period as well. To make them easier to read, the interviews are given in abbreviated, edited form, although the speaking style of each respondent is retained. They are illustrated with photographs, documents and sound excerpts that convey the mood of the period.

Our most recent project on content development entitled *Our 20th Century* – we are still editing the pilot version consisting of only seven interviews – follows the work we have started in traditional publications in the latest decade. *The memory of the sixties*, *The memory of the Revolution*, or *89:56* – where former participants of the revolution recollect the change of the political regime in 1989 and their role in the organization of the reburial of the martyrs – these three volumes tell the episodes of a historical event in chronological line through the eyes of different, alternate participants. They are public histories made up of personal histories. In case of *Our 20th Century* we'd like to narrate the history of a longer period from a subjective viewpoint, starting from WWI and arriving to our days. For the moment we are working on seven interviews. We have determined two sets of topics, a sequence of historical topics (like WWI, economic crisis, persecution of the Jew, participation in WWII, multi-party system, state industry are some of them), and an other sequence of personal topics (family background, birth, socialization, schooling, marriage, professional carrier) and we select the convenient part from each interview to match these entries. In the presentation the readers will be able to scroll the history of the century along different lines: 1. one person's reflections to the history along the historical topics 2. one person's life along the personal topics 3. the different ways of living the same event in case of the historical topics 4. changes in everyday life (what was the school in the thirties compared to that of the fifties, for example). Obviously, aware of the importance of visual experience in our days, we will illustrate the main core of interviews with as many photos and as many documentary excerpts it is possible.