

Oral History: Preservation of Life Stories

by Elena Volkova

“Biography pretends that a life can be told, when experience teaches us that it cannot. We suppress the knowledge, because we have a need for stories, a need to make sense of lives.”

Virginia Woolf, ‘Sketches of the Past’,
Moments of Being, 1976

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What is Oral History: some definitions

People’s stories have a universal appeal. We all like to listen to people’s stories. The stories give meaning to our life. They can profoundly change us. They can teach and entertain. We like to share the stories that made an impact on us. And at some stage some of us go back to a storyteller with a single purpose to capture the story and immortalise it for other people to listen and be electrified. In this particular case what we deal with is an Oral History (OH).


The practitioners in oral history around the world agree that the term itself is imprecise. “It is used to refer to formal, rehearsed accounts of the past presented by culturally sanctioned tradition-bearers; to informal conversations about “the old days” among family members, neighbours, or co-workers; to printed compilations of stories told about past times and present experiences; and to recorded interviews with individuals deemed to have an important story to tell.”¹

The most concise and right to the point definition belongs to Beth Robertson, an oral historian from South Australia and an author of the *Oral History Handbook*, who said “Oral history is the picture of the past in people’s own words”.²

Oral tradition, stories and memories have been passed down from generation to generation for centuries. However the modern definition of oral history refers to tape or digitally recorded interviews. It helps to chronologically define the moment of birth of oral history as a time

¹ “Getting Started: What is Oral History?,” <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/what.html>.

² Beth M. Robertson, *Oral History Handbook* (Unley, S. Aust. : Oral History Association of Australia, South Australian Branch, 2006).



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when the capture of the stories became easily achieved. It coincided with the profound changes in our conscience between two world wars and especially after the Second World War when the validity of the personal accounts of war veterans, Holocaust survivors, POWs and civilians who suffered the consequences of the war, became equal if not more important than the official “written” accounts.

Western tradition connects the beginning of OH with the work of Allan Nevins at Columbia University in the 1940s. Nevins was the first to initiate a systematic recording on tape and preservation for future research recollections of historical significance. While working on a biography of President Grover Cleveland, he stumbled upon the fact that there is a lack of factual materials in terms of diaries, letters or memoirs that he as a biographer used to rely on. It happened partially because the telephone was replacing personal correspondence. Nevins came up then with the idea of conducting interviews with participants in recent history to supplement the written record. He conducted his first interview in 1948 with New York civic leader George McAneny, and thus the contemporary oral history movement was born.³

However I would consider a different, much earlier time, as a birth of Oral History. When I was working on preservation of the phonograph recordings of Leo Tolstoy, I discovered that the idea behind the invention of the phonograph was to preserve, by recording on wax cylinders, the voice of the prominent thinkers of the time with their message for future generations. I have no doubt that this was a significant piece of oral history. Thomas Edison sent his first trial machines to several people. One of them was Gandhi, another – Leo Tolstoy.


Oral history around the world

It would be interesting to examine how the issue of preservation of oral history is approached around the world. It will also help to understand how oral history CAN be used.

There is a substantial body of work in the field of OH in Eastern Europe and the number of oral history projects conducted there over the past decade proves the growing interest in this area of research. For example, public historians and scholars in Ukraine use this method extensively to analyse and outline specific features of collective memory and the ways to capture and preserve it. Through projects like *Ostarbeiters of the Third Reich*, *The Women’s Story: A Return*, *Born for Ordeal*, *Life on the Background of the War* and *The Sinking Villages* they attempted to dip into the resources that were previously ignored by the official historiography. These resources were the memory and the recollections of the ordinary people – the eye-witnesses and participants of the past events.

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³ “Getting Started.”



“The work of the Ukrainian scholars reveals the advantages and shortcomings of the method, namely the reliability of personal evidence as a historical source, and the connection between individual and collective memory, and the transformation of historical, ethnic, gender, religious and other identities under the influence of a certain historical experience.”

evidence as a historical source, and the connection between individual and collective memory, and the transformation of historical, ethnic, gender, religious and other identities under the influence of a certain historical experience. To me, the ground-breaking work of our Ukrainian colleagues signified an important development in the society in the search of a new national identity – a tendency that is characteristic of all break-away states of the former USSR, including Russia.

Their work is closely related to the work of our German colleagues. From 2005, the German Federal Foundation *Memory, Responsibility, and the Future* initiated and financed the *International Slave and Forced Labourers Documentation Project*. Its main task was to collect documentary evidence of people who, during the Second World War, were engaged in slave and forced labour in the territory of the Third Reich. The project involved participants from 24 European countries, as well as from Israel, USA and South Africa, and was coordinated by The Institute for History and Biography, Hagen University (Germany). Approximately 650 interviews were recorded for the project revealing an interweaving character of collective and individual, private remembrances, with apparent subjectivity, frequent irrationality, and generally a non-conformist attitude towards the official narratives.

A very interesting example of preservation of oral history is the work of Australian historian Janis Wilton and artist Fiona Davis for the Maitland Regional Gallery and Museum, New South Wales. Wilton and Davis interviewed people who had memories of the college, using a traditional documentary research approach. In addition, people brought in objects, such as a hat made at the college, which were significant to them. Davis then created an installation art work incorporating the objects and stories. The installation was a non-narrative, immersive experience, conveying the message of the formal institution and the ways in which it has been subverted.

A recorded memory can take many forms. Archives, web applications and books are the most common. But there can be real surprises. For example, twenty cultural gardens were created by migrants in Cleveland, Ohio as a way of telling their stories and subsequently turning these gardens into the oral history educational centres for students.

Oral history, by definition, is a very democratic form and is therefore used for a variety of community projects across the globe. American researcher Martha Bloomfield developed a combined and multifaceted oral history and art program for homeless youths, called *Your Story and Mine*. She uses interviews with homeless people as the basis for a project that encourages communication and skills development amongst participants. She noted how telling life stories can increase self-esteem.

Oral history can be presented through theatre or dance. Australian performer and a community worker Jen Barrkman pioneered



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a ‘Talkback’ theatre where the stories told by the members of the audience are spontaneously re-enacted by the actors.

A group of young American student dancers interviewed families and friends about the experiences of losing a loved one and then re-presented the interviews as dance. The dancers commented that dancing the interviews allowed them to understand the oral histories more deeply.

Oral history is widely used in the museum context as a background for stories or the objects in their own right.

The project that I am starting this week will explore the possibilities of oral history and, more generally, storytelling as a therapeutic tool in the work with our military personnel returning from the combat zones in Iraq and Afghanistan.


Storytelling is a great therapeutic tool. We all know how it feels when we share a burden through telling the story, or confessing, or letting it out of our chests. Oral history takes it on board by developing ‘dignity therapy’.

At the Sheffield Macmillan Unit for Palliative Care, an ‘oral history service’ is enabling patients to produce audio recordings of their life histories. Staff in Palliative Care commented that participants of an oral history program enjoyed recalling personal experience in a whole life context, shaping their identity with a comfortable narrative. This process of remembering reinforced their sense of identity, at a time when circumstances may have changed their identities out of recognition. Patients who created a recording as a legacy for their family also enhanced their own sense of dignity”.⁴

For those who would like to learn more about oral history, I would highly recommend reading the works of Alessandro Portelli, an Italian scholar of American literature and culture, oral historian, writer for the daily newspaper *Il Manifesto*, and musicologist. Portelli writes extensively on oral history and memory.

According to Portelli, memory is not a noun but a verb, activity not a fact – it’s remembering. What was especially interesting to me is his interpretation of “wrong memories”. Memory is a trace of experience that deteriorates with time. But a ‘constructed’ story has its validity as it represents a search for the meaning of the past events rather than strives for accuracy. The narrative will keep changing according to the relationship we have with the past. It is especially evident in any kind of political narrative. It is essential and a very revealing process. And as such it is a document of the present as well as of the past. If the story is told “correctly” you would probably learn nothing. With that – he warns: don’t confuse a wrong memory for the lie. It’s a big difference and should be observed while interviewing generals or politicians.

⁴ “Department of Oncology,” <http://www.shef.ac.uk/oncology/staffprofiles/winslow> ; original reference, <http://www.sheffield.nhs.uk/palliativecare/macmillanunit.php>, is no longer active due to changes in the NHS brought about by the Health and Social Care Act 2012.



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The memory needs to be shared to become a part of our progress as humans. So what is the role, the place and responsibility of an oral historian in this context?

The relationships that are forged between the oral historians and their subjects are complex. Emma Vickers, oral historian from Great Britain, says: “Human memory is a complex historical resource unlike any other; it is all at once transient, subjective and ethereal. As those of us who work with memory know all too well, the ‘shared authority’ of the interview merely offers one time and situation-specific distillation of a highly complex entity. Often, all that lays between the interviewer and an hour of meaningful response has less to do with skilful interviewing and more with a whole set of spoken and unspoken variables; so for instance, the time of day, the narrator’s perception of their interview partner and their health and wellbeing. These limitations are part of the attraction. It is history that cannot be remade”.

But when very traumatic memories surface oral historians have to be at their subjects’ aid and act as counsellors and confidants. In this situation it is hard to differentiate between an effective, objective researcher and a human who is just as likely to suffer trauma as a respondent.

The obvious resemblance between oral history and psychotherapy means that we need to know how we can effectively deal with this aspect of the practice. It needs to be factored into the training that we receive and deliver. The oral historian must ensure that the respondents are safe and well prior to, during and after the interview, ensure that they are happy with how they have been represented in any publication and that they agree with any conditions of access. The aftercare is exceptionally important. We are helping people to tell their stories and usually it becomes a lifelong journey.

Teaching oral history

The Oral History Association of Australia was formed in 1978 to promote the best practice of oral history and provide information and forums for discussion about oral history.

Since that time we have gone through dramatic change. This change was the Digital Revolution, closely followed by the revolution in Social Media. When I began my work as an oral historian we recorded on tape and edited with scissors. As with many of my colleagues I had to learn the laws and tricks, mysteries and miracles of the digital world. The revolution of the social media presented an opportunity to adapt recorded life stories to new realms of online media.

We, the association of oral historians, had to stay abreast of the latest developments and train our members, as the skills required to undertake a project have changed dramatically beyond requiring a notepad, pen and a tape recorder.



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The Queensland branch has a strong history of practice in delivering oral history workshops for its members and the wider community. In late 2010 we designed a set of community workshops to cover the fundamental aspects of a typical oral history project. The workshops are facilitated by key committee members and best practitioners in the field of oral history. Every workshop is run twice during the year ensuring those interested have increased opportunities to participate.

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Workshop schedule is as follows:

- Oral history basics – overview of a standard oral history project (1 day).
- Overview of ethics/copyright/permissions/standards (1/2 day).
- Introduction to photography/video for interviewing (1/2 day).
- Overview of the recording equipment/scanning. File management and standards (1/2 day).
- Introduction to editing/transcribing/sound editing: *Audacity* and *Express Scribe* software (1/2 day).
- Interviewing - theory and practice (1 day).
- What to do with the recorded material: offers suggestions for showcasing oral history transcripts, audio, video and photos as writing, digital stories, exhibitions, books, blogs, web community space and family chronicles (1 day).

More details can be found on the association website.⁵

Where from here: transmedia challenge

People’s stories are universal but the means of storytelling are constantly changing. A theorist Henry Jenkins coined the term of *Transmedia Storytelling* in 2003: ‘A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole’. Transmedia engages audiences at a variety of levels allowing different entry points in to the story, the points that resonate most with the media consumers. Each new work brings something new to the story, and takes advantage of the conventions of each platform.

Transmedia employs oral history as a method of capturing people’s stories and then interprets these stories in a form of:

- Digital storytelling;
- Theatre;
- Video games;
- Interactive websites;
- Books;
- Archives and libraries;

⁵ “Oral History Association of Australia-Queensland Inc,” www.ohaaqld.org.au.

“The stories will be kept for future generations as part of an archiving and documenting process of the Hope Vale community’s rich and living culture.”

- Family chronicles;
- Therapy groups;
- Community /public history;
- Life histories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other groups who may be poorly represented in written sources;
- Museum exhibitions;
- Television;
- Corporate history; and
- Publishing in the clouds.

Digital storytelling is the most commonly used form of storytelling that directly utilises oral history interviews. It evolved in the 1990s as a complex social network of knowledge production. Everyone with access to a computer could now “sing” for themselves and publish their work for everyone to judge and enjoy.⁶ The following two examples showcase the use of Digital Storytelling.

A very innovative project was carried out in Cape York, Queensland, in 2008. Incorporated in the Pelican-Hope Vale marine life research project, and supported by the State Library of Queensland and Arts Queensland, it facilitated the production of a collection of stories of the Guugu Yimmathirr people that were made during a three-week workshop.

The curator of the project, Dr Samia Goudie, outlined that working with the Guugu Yimmathirr community helped identify some key elements in producing digital stories.

According to Goudie, the digital storytelling project had surprising and unpredictable outcomes, for example, it prompted the revival of traditional skills in the community, such as canoe building. Other outcomes included:

- Exposing youth and general community to further potentials;
- Skills transference (both ways);
- Capacity building;
- Bridging generational and digital divide;
- Stimulating interest in storytelling and recording/archiving knowledge;
- Returning to sea country/country: making links with wellbeing; and
- Bringing together technology and traditional knowledge.

The stories will be kept for future generations as part of an archiving and documenting process of the Hope Vale community’s rich and living culture.⁷

The role of the methods of oral history and digital storytelling is evident in the public history project *Sharing Stories*. Traditionally,

⁶ John Hartley, “TV Stories: From Representation to Productivity,” in *Story circle: digital storytelling around the world*, ed. John Hartley and Kelly McWilliam (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 24.

⁷ Samia Goudie, “Stories of Hope and Resilience: Hope Vale – Pelican Project Digital Stories.” www.samiastories.wordpress.com



“The participants were represented by the older generation of Kelvin Grove residents, whose computer competence and, in some cases, literacy skills were not adequate. These challenges were overcome by the introduction of oral history methods in which the participants were interviewed or prompted by open-ended questions to tell their stories.”

public history projects employ oral history as a research method. However, the goal of the *Sharing Stories* project was to encourage community engagement in the area that underwent urban redevelopment and was transformed into the Kelvin Grove Urban Village (KGUV).

The research team employed both an oral history approach, creating a pool of substantial long interviews with the participants, and a set of digital stories produced by the participants.

The participants were represented by the older generation of Kelvin Grove residents, whose computer competence and, in some cases, literacy skills were not adequate. These challenges were overcome by the introduction of oral history methods in which the participants were interviewed or prompted by open-ended questions to tell their stories.

The *Sharing Stories* project was the first of this kind in Australia that was conducted as a part of urban redevelopment. It proved “to be very effective as a means of focusing interest and creating a public profile for the much larger range of materials – the book and the living archive of oral histories, photographs, and documentation – that make up the *Sharing Stories* project overall, as a people’s history of the Kelvin Grove area”.⁸

8 Jean Burgess and Helen Klaebe, “Digital Storytelling as Participatory Public History in Australia,” in *Story circle: digital storytelling around the world*, ed. John Hartley and Kelly McWilliam (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 164.

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And finally ...

Transcribe? Consider *Express Scribe*: <http://www.nch.com.au/scribe/>

Donate? For advice, contact State Library of Queensland: <http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/resources/queensland-stories>

Edit? We recommend *Audacity*, free sound editing software: <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>