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## **(Re)connecting the Past: Remarks Upon the Role of Oral History in Social Media as Part of Modern Intellectual and Public Discourse in 21st Century Poland**

*Abstract:* What does it take for a modern man to understand his past comprehensively? With the progress of technology nowadays assuming an ever-rapid speed, oral history – one of the important means of understanding our ancestry – can be commonly encountered, though with different attributes of historical “illustriousness” marking each individual’s testimony (depending on the context of a material’s publication, as well as the historical background). Everyone has acquired new methods of expression, made possible by social media. An important testimony can now be recorded live and in real time (practically by everyone possessing a computer or mobile phone) with a very broad range of broadcast, thanks to the Internet. However, spoken history, whether in the traditional or digital realm, could also pave way for many erroneous impressions. As a result, one may hypothetically wonder how oral history stands up to the task of didacticism in our contemporary reality. Has it lost its value regarding popular history, or perhaps even taken a place not witnessed before? And how does it now affect an individual “user” as part of the digital humanities?

Following the achievements in theoretical workshops in the fields of sociology, history, as well as cultural anthropology, this paper focuses on underlining the most important aspects of the presence of oral history in modern historical discourse, with regard

to the technological assets at public disposal. The main purpose is to familiarize the reader with key issues related to the topic, more specifically to highlight the patterns in which oral history nowadays functions in social media, define the relevant possibilities as well as dangers, and to elaborate upon the matter of the changes which occurred in oral history reception because of the Internet community. The secondary goal is to provide the reader with an opportunity for critical assessment of the attributes of oral history in the digital era.

*Keywords:* Polish history, oral history, digital history, Internet community, digital era

Every civilization deserves its witnesses. As Czesław Miłosz memorably remarked on the pages of his famous *Issa Valley*, “The living owe it to those who no longer speak to tell their story for them”.<sup>1</sup> Ever since the prehistoric and ancient times, verbal expressions and spoken language remained one of the primary, yet pivotal means of conveying a possibly historical message (of either personal, or public, official content).<sup>2</sup> Whether in the deep jungles of the Amazon and Latin America, Egypt of the pharaohs, Greek poleis, or even medieval European towns and villages, writing has been considered a sacred testimony, unavailable to the most of the populace. However, although the skills of writing and reading remained a recognizable trademark of the elite, another form of communication governed the everyday existence of the commoners for millennia. A phenomenon that often led to rumours, gossip, and, thus, wrongful accusations. Nevertheless, it was also a constitutional part of oral ancestry.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary researchers encapsulate it in the term – oral history.

As hard as it sometimes appears for scholars to define oral history as such – for it may be perceived as a partly illusorily, ever-shifting theme – it has nevertheless likely remained the most emotional, direct, and human way of conveying

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<sup>1</sup> Czesław Miłosz, *The Issa Valley*, transl. Louis. Iribarne (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 124.

<sup>2</sup> Michael V. Angrosino, *Exploring Oral History: A Window on the Past*, (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2008), 9-11; and further; Ronal J. Grele (et al.), *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, (New York/Westport/London: Praeger, 1991), 4-7, 156-171.

<sup>3</sup> *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology*, eds. Thomas Lee Charlton, Lois E. Myers, Rebecca Sharpless, (London/New York: Rowman Altamira, 2007), 11-14; Angrosino, *Exploring Oral History*, 1, 6.

testimonies, and also a universal part of any society and culture over the centuries.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, it is one which we can identify with, express compassion, and embrace the facts provided, perhaps even to a degree far surpassing strict history books narrations (historiography).<sup>5</sup> A rather concise definition of oral history worth mentioning has been provided by the researchers Barbara W. Sommer, Nancy MacKay, and Mary Kay Quinlan:

Oral history is a primary source material collected in an interview setting with a witness to or a participant in an event or a way of life and is grounded in the context of time and place to give it meaning. It is recorded for the purpose of preserving the information and making it available to others.<sup>6</sup>

To elaborate upon the definition above, the persistent paradigm is that oral history also essentially relies on human memory, which might be its worst weakness, but also the most valuable characteristic.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, memory depends on many factors, such as the emotional background of the experienced event (trauma, joy, or indifference), possible mercenary interests of the witness, his or her age, as well as the state of mental and physical health, or even the time of day he or she grants the interview. A historian or journalist therefore has to operate with utmost caution; human memory can be fallible, yet also outstandingly useful in envisioning different approaches to the past.<sup>8</sup> It should therefore not be considered the ultimate key to solving the puzzle, which the past itself represents, but moreover one of the means

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<sup>4</sup> Similar remarks: Grele, *Envelopes of Sound*, 242-244. Regarding the complexity of oral history's definition, see: Michał Kierzkowski, "Historia mówiona – próba definicji pojęcia", *Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej*, 4 (2014), 5-20, and further references to topical literature therein.

<sup>5</sup> Karin Stögner, "Life story interviews and the "Truth of Memory"", in: *Oral History: The Challenges of Dialogue*, eds. Marta Kurkowska-Budzan, Krzysztof Zamorski, (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009), 169-174; Angrosino, *Exploring Oral History*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara W. Sommer, Nancy MacKay, Mary Kay Quinlan, *Managing a Community: Oral History Project*, vol. 3, (London/New York: Routledge, 2013), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Doug A. Boyd, "Achieving the Promise of Oral History in a Digital Age", in: *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Donald A. Ritchie, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 286-288; Karen E. Fields, "What One Cannot Remember Mistakenly", in: *Memory and History: Essays on Recalling and Interpreting History*, eds. Jacklyn Jeffrey, Glenace Edwall, (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994), 89 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Angrosino, *Exploring Oral History*, 19-30; Grele, *Envelopes of Sound*, 50-60, 156-169 and further; Graham Smith, *Oral History (Historical Insights: Focus on History)*, (Coventry: HEA, 2010), 10-13. Also see: Alice M. Hoffman, Howard S. Hoffman, *Memory Theory: Personal and Social*, in: *Thinking about Oral History: Theories and Applications*, eds. Lois Charlton, Louis E. Meyers, Rebecca Sharpless, (Lanham/New York/Toronto: AltaMira Press, 2008), 33-54; *History of Oral History*, 72-75.

with which one can encapsulate various images of the past in a broader social landscape.

It is highly important to underline the difference between individual memory, serving the primarily personal purpose of a potential witness, and public memory, which is mainly constituted by popular knowledge and worldviews, and implicated by different conditions. Both are often subject to third-party influences, which may therefore cause collateral damage in terms of memorial representation. In time, an individual memory can transform into a shared communal entity (as Douglas A. Boyd put it).<sup>9</sup> In the case of social media, memory and its preservation play a key role, yet with rather different rules than before, including the aspects of increased contestation and anonymity, and, as a result, different perceptions of web identity.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the centuries, orality has shaped mentalities and cognitive abilities, as one of the most suggestive, although subjective scopes of perceiving the surrounding reality.<sup>11</sup> How remarkable, that one of the most important and influential accounts ever known to man – the Bible – has actually been written down centuries (the Old Testament), or at least a few decades (the New Testament), after its origin! Another meaningful example is that Homeric epics were imparted through generations before being compositionally written down during Pisistratus' reign in Athens, and numerous are the examples of oral history employed in the context of prophecies (most notably the Delphic and sibylline ancient oracles, or the illustrious Maasai shamanistic traditions still extant today). This leads us towards a more general implication, that the way oral history was featured in different cultural or ideological backgrounds of certain civilizations, especially linked with religious aspects, introduces it as a theme allocated somewhere in-between the spheres of “mundane” and “profane”.<sup>12</sup>

With the arrival of the 20th century, however, oral history has somewhat naturally assumed a different dimension, due to global social transformations and

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<sup>9</sup> See on basis of the monography: Douglas A. Boyd, *Crawfish Bottom: Recovering a Lost Kentucky Community*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 6-7, 79 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Boyd, “Achieving the Promise of Oral History in a Digital Age”, 285 and further.

<sup>11</sup> *History of Oral History*, 27-29.

<sup>12</sup> See Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral History and Public History*, (Albany/New York: SUNY Press, 1990).

impressive achievements in public education (since reading and writing has become an essential skill in most parts of the world).<sup>13</sup> Firstly, it has been academically identified and critically defined (at least in its general features) thanks to advances in theoretical studies in the European arts and humanities. Secondly, the influence of mass culture and the settlement of rapidly expanding mass media further magnified the complexity of oral history in our modern reality as a pivotal part of Digital Humanities.<sup>14</sup> In an age of digital wonder, where virtue signalling, substantiated with a rich palette of emoticons or brief tweets, makes some of us question the actual course of Western culture, Miłosz's quote acquires an entirely new meaning. For we might well ask ourselves: "How does the ancestry of oral history change with the evolution of social media, such as Facebook®, Twitter®, YouTube®, Instagram®, etc.? Has oral history transferred underground? Is orality a phenomenon still coherent enough to establish a binding link between people, and if so - how did its associative role change as a result of media advancements?"<sup>15</sup>

### **Deeds spoken worldwide – application of oral history in social media contexts (possibilities and dangers)**

Even a brief survey of our reality leads to an irresistible conclusion that the Internet has relatively quickly become a powerful tool, supplying its users with incredible amounts of information in split seconds every day. People stay connected, as well as identify themselves, globally, although finding the "right" answers in the digital realm could prove a difficult challenge.<sup>16</sup> Alongside the Internet evolved the social media; a multitude of applications (abbreviated as "apps") based on

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<sup>13</sup> It ought to be noted, that orality has maintained its supremacy as a school of spoken (and not written) wisdom in India and Asia, for far longer that it has been observed in Europe and North America, therefore generally comprehended "West".

<sup>14</sup> See especially the research work: *Oral History and Digital Humanities. Voice, Access, and Engagement*, ed. Douglas A. Boyd, Mary A. Larson, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> The case of conceptualizing oral history regarding the World Wide Web venue, and social media at the foremost, has received considerable attention from scholars in recent years. Topical research works differ in discipline and key field of research analysis. For a thorough survey of key authors, see the list contained in: *An Oral History Bibliography: A Research Guide by the Columbia University Center for Oral History*, ed. Elizabeth Grefrath, (New York: Columbia University Center for Oral History, 2009). By far worthy of recommendation is also the journal "Oral History", published every half a year by the Oral History Society.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. William Schneider, "Oral History in the Age of Digital Possibilities", in: *Oral History and Digital Humanities*, 19-22, 27. Cf. Stephen M. Sloan, "Swimming in the Exaflood: Oral History as Information in the Digital Age", in: *Oral History and Digital Humanities*, 175-186.

information supply and transfer, govern the Web. Community online services, such as Facebook®, Twitter®, YouTube®, Instagram®, WhatsApp®, Skype®, and others, gather hundreds of millions of users worldwide. Interestingly enough, they also add new meaning to oral testimonies and storytelling.

As it is widely known, posts and tweets remain the beating heart of virtual society, including the realm of social media. With it, the users can provide their own feedback, popularize content, emulate, and integrate with the community. What is worth accentuating, they can also include an account of events: in written, pictured, as well as verbal form. Consequently, the member and user of social media circles becomes a participant in both establishing, as well as popularizing diversified content.<sup>17</sup> What is somewhat paradoxical, the content itself can “live its own life”, when a multitude of interpretations from other participants follow. In other words, what one user submits might then become transcribed and provided to others in new contexts.<sup>18</sup>

The evolution of social media brought about a thorough reevaluation of contemporary intellectual intercourse and largely influenced the collaborative convergence of digital humanities. Social media have since offered a tremendous opportunity for people to conduct and share records of their own interviews (for example through Skype® or Face-time®).<sup>19</sup> This has coincided with the rearrangement of the three pillars of the classical comprehension of oral history, the witness, account, and credibility.<sup>20</sup>

Theoretically speaking, any Web user with a digital recorder, or a camera recorder implemented on his mobile phone or laptop, can nowadays become a witness, regardless of his or her age. With the technology provided, he or she may therefore record a video account of an oral testimony for various purposes. The account can involve his or her normal, everyday activities or duties, share opinions on the author, and family matters, but it might also be a – more or less purposely

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<sup>17</sup> Danah A. Boyd, Nicole Ellison, “Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship”, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13 (2008): 210-213 and further.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Sloan, “Swimming in the Exaflood: Oral History as Information in the Digital Age” 180-181.

<sup>19</sup> Schneider, “Oral History in the Age of Digital Possibilities” 25, 30-33.

<sup>20</sup> For example, this is frequently mentioned in the captivating research narrative of: Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, (Albany/New York: SUNY Press, 1991).

made – record of important events (from crime occurrences and natural disasters, as far as war scenes). The same applies to interviews, homemade or more official. Whilst little can be done in regard to authenticity of such recordings, their credibility is a different case. It is highly important, however, to be able to distinguish storytelling from a speech of historical mark.

The users give their “testimony” mostly in the form of public video blogs, and spoken words – often supported with strong emotional reactions (trembling voice, tears, and gestures) – are the essence of their statement. A personal, seemingly minor account, could theoretically acquire “historical” traits if it becomes very popular.<sup>21</sup> The same applies to videos of many YouTubers; the more the narration is supported by other users, the more convincing and relevant the overall message becomes.<sup>22</sup> This, in turn, can even have considerable political implications (at least in local politics), given the impact social media nowadays have as a non-mainstream tool of shaping public opinion.<sup>23</sup>

Once a video blog is published, it becomes the subject of social media community discussion, that is, if it has been “noticed” in the World Wide Web. Let us note that the measurement of credibility in social media does not necessarily depend on persons of authority in society - e.g. historians, psychologists, and other specialists - but mainly on the amount of attention a video receives from other social media participants and co-creators. Therefore, “likes”, “shares”, “tags”, and “subscriptions” are traits which show a user’s renown, or even become his trademark. Nonetheless, they are a currency with which a user buys popularity. More technically speaking, the more “likes” or “thumbs” under a video and the more viral (“clickable”) it becomes, the more credible and persuasive it is, or so it appears.

The above process bears considerable implications when confronted with the theme of online information exchange amongst members of modern society. To a certain extent, it might pose a danger in terms of education and the so-called fair information market.

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. interesting remarks on the matter by Mary Larson, ““We All Begin with a Story”: Discovery and Discourse in the Digital Realm”, in: *Oral History and Digital Humanities*, 157-158, 165-169. Also see: Smith, *Oral History*, 15-16.

<sup>22</sup> Ruth E. Page, *Stories and Social Media: Identities and Interaction*, (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2012), 188 and further.

<sup>23</sup> Schneider, “Oral History in the Age of Digital Possibilities” 30-31.

Whilst imagery and writing comprise a large part of interactive dialogue that social media create, oral testimony and storytelling captured on camera are those which exert the most emotional influence, especially if the interview is combined with images. Apart from the multitude of everyday video-blogged reports from YouTubers, another type of oral accounts can be found on the Web, one which certainly receives no less credit among the Internet society. These are the actual interviews with witnesses of pivotal events in the recent few decades of world history. What is topical, many of such recordings have been meticulously collected and shared on YouTube®, Facebook® and other Web media services.<sup>24</sup>

Basically, each of the oral interviews offers a unique insight into the circumstances of more or less significant events, and can be an affective experience.<sup>25</sup> It also carries great comparative value. If an agenda arises, the videos are nowadays easily accessible and can therefore be used for many, also political, purposes. On the other end, accessing the video and watching it until the very end, considering that some interviews are quite long, might not necessarily be welcoming for everyone. This, consequently, somewhat restricts the category of receivers to a dedicated circle of online audience, mostly mature.

Apparently, the reminiscences which spark the most interest among the Polish populace (and public debate subsequently) are accounts of “Solidarność” members, concerning various manifestations and incidents from the times of the socialist Polish People’s Republic in the years 1952-1989 (abbr. PRL). Also very popular are the recollections of the remaining World War II veterans – primarily participants of the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, and generally soldiers of the Polish Home Army, and, furthermore, testimonies of survivors and witnesses of the Nazi-orchestrated genocide known as the Holocaust.

Nearly every oral testimony, especially of the kind that refers to traumatic war events, is bound to resound with a specific, often gripping narration. As many scholars underlined, oral history essentially remains a recollection of memories of an

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<sup>24</sup> As valuable as it would be for the discourse, highlighting them broadly in a multicultural range would by far exceed the research boundaries of this article, and such an attempt would only depreciate the focus they individually deserve. Nonetheless, constricting the analysis to the Polish context provides plentiful space for critical assessment.

<sup>25</sup> See the interesting article of Douglas A. Boyd, ““I Just Want to Click on It to Listen”: Oral History Archives, Orality, and Usability”, in: *Oral History and Digital Humanities*, 77-96.



individual past, a reflection of a person's deeds and beliefs, highly subjective, yet not necessarily exaggerated in coinciding facts.<sup>26</sup> Naturally, even the most emphatic and seemingly selfless individual cannot include all the factors which (supposedly) surrounded the event that he or she is describing as it remains beyond his or her cognitive capabilities and personal self.<sup>27</sup> He can, however, deliver a probable relation; least to say – provide a spectre, a glimpse of the past.<sup>28</sup> In other words, during his speech (or speeches), a history witness accordingly describes a part of his life as remembered at that particular moment when the interview takes place. That way he actually promotes a certain vision of history.<sup>29</sup> As the ethnographer Michael V. Angrosino described it: “modern oral history projects focus on putting together a collective portrait of an event as seen by a multitude of participants speaking only about that event.”<sup>30</sup> Depending on additional factors, such as the social or political status of the witnesses, their age, or character, the overall notion can only be magnified. The same categories also apply to the experience and interests of the contemporary viewer and recipient, who is equipped with his own particular mindset, as well as expectations.<sup>31</sup> Oral history in the modern world therefore cannot be analysed with disregard of the aspect of perceptibility and the context of time and place.<sup>32</sup>

This and similar determinants have become the primary subject of memory studies – a discipline of humanities which is currently experiencing impressive advancement, particularly in Europe and North America.<sup>33</sup> It ought to be noted that in this context human memory can stray far from research hypotheses. One event (for example, a street fight during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944), outlined by different

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<sup>26</sup> *History of Oral History...* 33-40 and further, 230.

<sup>27</sup> E.g. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound*, 212-222.

<sup>28</sup> A browse of opinions in the matter can be found in: Leena Rossi, “Oral historian: neither moralizer nor informer”, in: *Oral History: The Challenges of Dialogue*, 15-26. Also see: Hoffman, Hoffman, “Memory Theory”, 36-40; Ariella Van Luyn, “An obsession with storytelling: Conducting oral history interviews for creative writing”, *Ejournalist* 11/1 (2011): 32-36.

<sup>29</sup> Smith, *Oral History*, 8-9, 20-28.

<sup>30</sup> Angrosino, *Exploring Oral History*, 13-14.

<sup>31</sup> Boyd, “I Just Want to Click”, 77, 81-84 and further. Cf. James Bennett, “Human Values in Oral History”, *The Oral History Review* 11 (1985): 1-15.

<sup>32</sup> Grele, *Envelopes of Sound*, 88-95.

<sup>33</sup> A good introduction into the topic has been encompassed by the authors of the book: *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2008).

eyewitnesses, can become highly polarized in its detailed description. The probable explanation of such disparities might be that deficiencies in the memory of the witness have been subconsciously replaced with imaginary occurrences originating from entirely different contexts of later (or earlier) individual experience.<sup>34</sup>

Whilst attempting to comprehend the complexity of the presence and reception of oral history in social media, one cannot omit the American research achievements in which the problem has been the subject of intense analysis for well over a decade. One of the most notable contributions in the debate has been made by Douglas A. Boyd and his colleagues from the University of Kentucky. Besides several books and many research articles, Boyd created a wide-ranging online project together with experts from other American universities, including sociologists and historians, which has been dedicated to the latest technology as well as relevant methodology regarding oral history in modern reality.<sup>35</sup> As Terrell Frazier, Director of Outreach and Education at the Columbia Center for Oral History at Columbia University, and a participant in Boyd's project, remarks, digital possibilities and the broad span of the Internet immensely increase the reach and implication of oral history. Owing to social media, it has become possible to connect entire communities in web projects focused on gathering oral testimonies of historical witnesses. Therefore, oral history has acquired the potential to become a medium strengthening historical or cultural identities of both groups and individuals, with social media functioning as a field open for thought, inspirations, and recommendations.<sup>36</sup> Based on contrary arguments, it is significant to ask can social media therefore pose a threat to perceiving oral history, its academic status as a science in the field of humanities and, the ethos that it represents.

The matter is clearly sophisticated. The biggest risk that is accentuated in literature is the issue of misinterpretation as well as trivialization of the topics which

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<sup>34</sup> Such phenomenon has been memorably encapsulated by the Polish historical author, and poet, Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, in his essayistic autobiography book, concerning the meaning and repercussions of the Warsaw Uprising; see: Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, *Kinderszenen*, (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2008), *passim*.

<sup>35</sup> Visit: <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/> [accessed: 15.01.2019].

<sup>36</sup> Full interview available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2o3Ak1H3eWk> [accessed: 20.01.2019].

are commemorated in oral history interviews.<sup>37</sup> The possibility of expanding beyond academic circles in favour of a broad, lay audience through social media certainly sounds admirable, but, due to this fact, the substantive approach to historical subjects becomes somewhat simplified for the new receivers. The same applies to the source of interview recordings, if they are orchestrated by a nonacademic amateur, the chance of the interview being unprofessional is relatively higher, mostly due to the lack of experience of the interviewer. However, it must be stressed that the process of uploads of amateur oral interviews in the current digital age, where news spread globally, is inevitable (individually, or as part of a group of enthusiasts), as much as it is often quite spontaneous and motivated by a mere whim in favour of “likes” and “shares”. Hence the idea of workshops and educational programs for the enterprise not to be compromised. It is therefore the obligation of research specialists to carefully search for and analyse each interview which includes potential history witnesses along with the utmost prerogative to prevent the society from becoming dissipative with valuable knowledge of the past.<sup>38</sup>

Apart from Oral History in the Digital Age project, shortly after Facebook® established its primacy as the Internet application for web chat and generally comprehended social relations, numerous other web pages and groups have been created, devoted to the topic of oral history. Their users and moderators are still active today, and the groups do not cease to increase in followers. For example, for well over a decade, an immense study circle on the Internet has been established around the Canadian Oral History Association, which provides strong educational support in different branches - concerning both professional publishing market (“Journal d’histoire orale, The Oral History Review”), as well as a lively profile on Facebook® and on Twitter® (Oral History Forum).<sup>39</sup> The association operates globally, having many partners in different countries (including the US, Great

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Katherine Borland, “That’s Not What I Said: Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research”, in: *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks, Alistair Thomson, (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2006), 320-332; Alon Confino, “Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method”, *The American Historical Review* 102/5 (1997): 1400.

<sup>38</sup> Similar remarks in light of technology advancements and establishment of informational society: Steven High, “Telling Stories: a Reflection on Oral History and New Media”, *Oral History* 38/1 (2010): 101-112; Michael Frisch, Douglas Lambert, “Case Study: Between the Raw and the Cooked in Oral History (Notes from the Kitchen)”, in: *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, 333-335, 341, 347.

<sup>39</sup> See: <https://canoha.wordpress.com> (accessed: 11.09.2018), and links shared thereupon.

Britain, Germany, and France). In Europe, the efforts undertaken in the 1980's by academic members of the University of London resulted in the foundation of the Oral History Society (abbr. OHS) – an association consisting of historians, archivists, artists, social thinkers, as well as freelance journalists and a large number of volunteers, who are “dedicated to the collection and preservation of oral history, and to making it accessible to everyone”.<sup>40</sup> With the popularization of social media, OHS has not only considerably expanded with the addition of new members in the 21st century, but also began operating in many different channels simultaneously, and now promotes social initiatives, workshops, and oral history meetings on the Web.

Polish initiatives in the field are definitely not falling behind.<sup>41</sup> Topical inquiry into the Web reveals enterprises, for example, of the Polish Oral History Association, which operates in Kraków in cooperation with the Jagiellonian University (among other partners). Also noteworthy are the endeavours of “Remembrance and Future” and “Zajeźdźnia” history centres, both based in Wrocław and dedicated to popularizing the history of Upper Silesia, as well as preserving the cultural identity of the region among its inhabitants. The associations' work profile reveals an appreciation of oral history as a didactical method, especially in the context connected with the potential of social media. Furthermore, the Programme of Oral History, conducted by the “Brama – Teatr NN” organization, ought to be mentioned. In the course of recent years, “Brama” members have gathered over two thousand oral testimonies of history witnesses, regarding the Polish region of Lubelszczyzna in the period of 1918-1939, as well as concerning World War II and modern times. Each account has been archived digitally on the motherboard hard drive, and is accessible in “Brama” headquarters in Lublin, also, a selected part has been uploaded on the Web. Last but not least, one cannot underestimate the educational role of the Institute of National Remembrance, an institution which (among other things) participates in the upkeep of Polish historical heritage, particularly from the period of the existence

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. <http://www.ohs.org.uk/about/> (accessed: 11.09.2018).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Izabela Lewandowska, “Oral History in Poland today – research, projects and academic societies”, *Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej*, 1 (2011): 81-103.

of PRL in context of turbulent relations between the socialist government and the opposition.<sup>42</sup>

As mentioned before, all of the associations above undertake a variety of enterprises concerning educating the society, especially the youth, about oral history. The scale on which they do this would remain significantly smaller, if not for the communication amenities the Internet nowadays offers.<sup>43</sup> It is worthy to observe how the process influences the Web community from a research angle. Though discussions on the topic of oral history proceed, the whole discourse shows a tendency to evolve in a rather nonacademic manner.

In all cases, the posts and events (and therefore interests) of the groups concern upcoming conferences in oral history, the introduction of theoretical aspects of the topic, but also popularizing historical themes in which oral history has become the main conversational asset, and the primary recipients – instead of hermetic scholarly circles – are “ordinary” people.<sup>44</sup> Among the most commendable undertakings are workshops in oral history as well as readings with history witnesses. The witnesses also give frequent guest interviews in various historical documentary films. Moreover, fragments of their accounts are featured in short promotional videos shown on certain anniversaries, and they also often share seats, or even perform speeches, as guests of honour at important state celebrations.<sup>45</sup> The latter events might best be described as a tribute to emotional history that is being publicly and officially commemorated and reaffirmed, mostly in a patriotic climate.<sup>46</sup> In some cases, history witnesses might provide advice and share some of their recollections during historical reconstructions and gatherings of history fans as well.

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<sup>42</sup> Information about the Institute’s latest educational and research enterprises can be found on the website: <https://ipn.gov.pl/> [accessed: 05.10.2018]. To exemplify the policies, in recent years, the tales of „Niezłomni” resistance groups of the former Home Army have also been highlighted. One of the outcomes was the establishment of the Polish National Remembrance Day of “Niezłomni”. Since 2011, it is celebrated on March 1.

<sup>43</sup> Angrosino, *Exploring Oral History*, 52-54.

<sup>44</sup> Especially worthy of recommendation in this context is the fairly recent work of Barbara W. Sommer, *Practicing Oral History in Historical Organisations*, (London/New York: Routledge, 2015) (passim).

<sup>45</sup> Among the most recognizable occasions are: the anniversary of the uprising in the Jewish Ghetto in Warsaw (19.04), the outbreak of the Warsaw Uprising (01.08.) or the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp (27.01.).

<sup>46</sup> See: Jeff Friedman, “Fractious Action: Oral History - Based Performance”, in: *Thinking about Oral History*, particularly pages: 223-225, 230-234.

The greatest advantage all of these events offer to the audience is their socializing aspect, including the direct connection with a history witness, which could even be a once-in-a-lifetime occasion for some guests. Each year the number of the venerable witnesses decreases and each circumstance of their personal involvement regularly becomes a momentous occasion. Therefore, such events are an excellent opportunity of introducing and promoting oral history amongst the school youth in a familiar, lively, and entertaining way.<sup>47</sup> In fact, they remain a vivid confirmation of the rule that an interview's first purpose is to educate.<sup>48</sup> Peculiarly, young people at nearly every level of education (especially children) are statistically far better accustomed to learning through the oral, than the reading method.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, history introduced orally by veterans at a workshop, rather than via a course book lecture, makes it more likely to be acquired by the group. Moreover, a common practice is that meetings with history witnesses are broadcasted live on television and soon thereafter shared on social media. In effect, the value of information provided to the public increases immensely. Let us take notice that the associative role of oral history is in that case best represented in the support, if not reverence, that the witnesses earn from the audience in the form of warm applause after a ceremony speech or comments on YouTube® under the interview videos. Thus the source (a person providing valuable historical insight), in turn, becomes a shared authority.<sup>50</sup> This, overall, brings "freshness" into a problem that remained quite distant for most people, until the Internet became commonly accessible. Therefore, a thesis, that the perception of oral history as a discipline of humanities in the 21st century reality has changed and expanded beyond university debates, can be proposed.<sup>51</sup>

With the new media, a new dimension of the past (as well as present) follows. As the evolution of the Internet progresses, so evolve the patterns of influence and

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Marjorie L. McLellan, "Beyond the Transcript: Oral History as Pedagogy", in: *Oral History and Digital Humanities*, 105-107.

<sup>48</sup> *History of Oral History*, 162, 167, 183-186; Eva M. McMahan, "A Conversation Analytic Approach to Oral History Interviewing", in: *Thinking about Oral History*, 96.

<sup>49</sup> McLellan, "Beyond the Transcript: Oral History as Pedagogy" 99-114.

<sup>50</sup> Smith, *Oral History*, 10; cf. Van Luyn, "An obsession with storytelling", 36-37.

<sup>51</sup> See in this context: *Heroes - Repräsentationen des Heroischen in Geschichte, Literatur und Alltag*, eds. Johanna Rolshoven, Toni J. Krause, Justin Winkler, (Wetzlar: Transcript, 2018), 9-17, 28-30 and further; Page, *Stories and Social Media*, 99-112, 146-150.

propaganda of oral history.<sup>52</sup> Let us be mindful that the Internet, under the guise of anonymity, offers its users a more private and direct relation to various topics, including oral history, which is henceforth separated from stereotypical research on the book level. As a topic more and more mentioned on community websites, forums, blogs, etc., the phenomenon becomes redefined for the purpose of educating new generations. An anthropologist might only discern how the Generation Z (persons born in the period between mid-1990s and mid-2000s), especially handy with technological innovations, comprehend the past, how certain historical motives are emancipated, and how much identity surmounts the process of associating history with public discourse.

### **The observers and observed in the case of modern spoken history – Polish examples**

Fairly recently, on January 27, 2018, the 73<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the German Nazi concentration camp of Birkenau (liberated in 1945 by the soldiers of the Soviet Red Army) was celebrated. On that day, the Polish media, as well as the international news, have been stricken with the debate regarding the supposed Polish participation in the Holocaust, a theme that resurfaced abruptly and also had impact on the diplomatic level (the speech of the Israeli ambassador in Poland, Anna Azari). The pertinent issue has been identified in the parliamentary Act from January 26, 2018 regarding the *novelization of the founding Act of the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes Against the Polish Nation [and other entities]*. Approaches to the issue have strongly divided into two opposite camps; some commentators (politicians, historians, but also artists) argue in defence of Polish patriotism underlining themes of war heroism, opposition in death camps, and relevant Polish martyrology. On the contrary, others criticized the obliquities and tendencies to oversimplify Polish historical narration in context of the Holocaust.

To summon the convention of modernity, the more controversial the topic, the more media attention it receives, and a wider spectrum of sources is being used in the corresponding debate. Consequently, oral history substantiates the discussions which have been conducted not only on mainstream television, but more

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<sup>52</sup> Jo Blatti, "Public History and Oral History", *The Journal of American History* 77/2 (1990): 615-625.

importantly, on social media. Actually, the testimonies of the Holocaust survivors became pivotal sources in the case. Therefore, considerable government efforts have been made to popularize the theme of the Righteous Among the Nations of Polish origin, and their interviews for the broad international audience served as a counteroffensive against the voices that suggested Polish participation in the oppressive policy against the Jews in the Nazi-occupied Poland.

The interviews with the Jewish survivors and the Righteous Among the Nations, crucial witnesses of turbulent Polish and European history, have been collected and uploaded inter alia on YouTube®, and are therefore accessible almost without restrictions. In addition, they have mostly been subtitled in English and (or) German, which broadens their overall range. A user can read other opinions in the commentary section, make his own remarks, share the video elsewhere (for example on the Facebook® profile page), and most importantly, has the opportunity to establish an emotional connection with the interviewed person.<sup>53</sup>

Reminiscences from the times of war are contextually marked with momentous, if not even grave historical backgrounds; hence, they offer a great interpretational field and are a veritable source of emotions, both for the listeners and the speaker.<sup>54</sup> The accounts are hence not alien to sorrow and grief, but also compassion or relief, and all of these can be shared by the audience. As the British novel writer and essayist, Zadie Smith, remarked: “Every moment happens twice: inside and outside, and they are two different histories”.<sup>55</sup> This accurately encapsulates the paradox of elusiveness and simultaneous charm of oral history. It might teach, yet the vision of the past that is being conveyed may not be accurate in all aspects. Nevertheless, its suggestiveness could outrank many topical sources of literature.

The Holocaust, a crime incomparable to any other atrocity of mass scale recorded in human history, is also an invaluable prism through which we can analyse the patterns of oral commemoration of the genocide. In the aftermath of

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<sup>53</sup> Larson, “We All Begin with a Story” 157-158, 167.

<sup>54</sup> Further e.g. Marta Kubiszyn, “Oral history as a dialogue with the Polish-Jewish past of a local community from the perspective of social pedagogy”, in: *Oral History: The Challenges of Dialogue*, 169-178.

<sup>55</sup> Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*, (New York; Hamish Hamilton, 2003), 299.



World War II, when the intellectual elites in Europe have mostly been executed or driven away from their homelands, the publishing market suffered stagnation, and the resources as basic as printed matter were available only in scarce quantities, orality remained most influential among the people.

It is particularly noteworthy that oral history became a means to preserve the memory of events that were subject to censorship for political reasons in communist Poland. Let us therefore remember the most notorious cases of Jewish pogroms in Jedwabne (July 10, 1941) and Kielce (July 4, 1946), the Soviet executions of Polish officers known as the massacre in the Katyń forest (April 10, 1940), the tales of thousands of survivors of the war exile to Siberia (the so-called "Sybiracy"), or the long term persecutions of members of the "Solidarność" opposition movement (1970-1983 and further).

If only the written, published records of the past existed, modern history would be but a cold, bleak reflection of propaganda, dehumanized as much as lacking the emotions of the historical orator. In this context, paradoxically, Joseph Stalin was indeed close to the truth with his remark: "The death of one man is a tragedy. The death of millions is a statistic."<sup>56</sup> For a spoken account produces an interpersonal relation of the witness with the audience, it is based on a bond, could appear strikingly real, and often addresses many age categories (the older and the younger recipients of the message). The speakers' stories are therefore very much alive, in contrast to indifferent written statements. From minor reminiscences to epic tales, oral history undoubtedly has every potential to impress historical conscience, and studies regarding it are actually close to an interdisciplinary practice.<sup>57</sup> Nowadays we can challenge the more official book narrations with oral testimonies scrupulously gathered on video and transcribed, and as a result – achieve a viewpoint richer in details. With the support of social media, the possibilities of interaction multiply, and the distance between the source of study and the researcher

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<sup>56</sup> As attributed by Anton Antonov-Ovseyenko, *The Time of Stalin: Portrait of a Tyranny*, (New York: Harper&Row, 1981), 278.

<sup>57</sup> Especially worthy of recommendation in this case is the new dissertation of Marella Hoffman, *Practicing Oral History to Improve Public Policies and Programs*, (New York: Routledge, 2018). Cf. interesting remarks: Miroslav Vaněk, "Słuchać, poszukiwać, zrozumieć. Nie tylko o dialogu interdyscyplinarnym i oral history", *Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej* 7 (2017): 103-105, 109-111, 114.

shortens. Consequently, the overall historical image of a certain period becomes more polarized.

The topics of the Holocaust, Jewish persecutions, Warsaw uprising or "Solidarność" political activity are perfect examples of how oral history can both polarize as well as bind the society in a memorial movement, therefore influencing national identity or collective memory in regard to popular comprehensions of the past.<sup>58</sup> Recorded and published interviews with crucial witnesses of often problematic events from the turbulent Polish history certainly have the power to shift the balance of public opinion in favour or disregard of a certain historical attitude. In this context, social media actually substantiate the process, providing the space for public discourse outside of mainstream channels of narrative.

To recapitulate the above, the rise of social media has strongly differentiated the manner in which oral history is perceived by the modern society. For the majority of people, it has undoubtedly remained a more approachable and memorable individual experience than even the most witty and swiftest of book narratives. The principle of its value and popularity likely lies in the observation that, unlike literary accounts, oral history is expressive and founded primarily on human emotions. Because of the global range of the Internet, oral history acquired a new definition of accessibility. The primary role that oral history has acquired on Web community channels throughout the last decade could be described as a transmitter of identity and perspectives on an international scale. In connection, oral history has nowadays become a synonym of dialogue; its didactic aspects appear as strong as ever and influence mass culture. Agata Stolarz, a Polish oral history researcher, has indeed been true to the implication that orality, as a form of transcending history, could best be compared to an experience, with each of the testimonies being one of a kind, conveying the spirit of the witness to the media, and reflecting a different approach towards the past as interpreted through paradigms.<sup>59</sup> This can be noted regardless of the fact that spoken reports offer highly subjective perspectives, and occasionally may even be on the verge of assuming a popular history's notion. One can therefore only wonder what is more important in bringing up future generations and shaping

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<sup>58</sup>Cf. in this context: Confino, "Collective Memory and Cultural History", 1389-1393, 1401 ff.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Agata Stolarz, "„Podróż do Mezeritch". O doświadczeniu historii mówionej", *Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej* 4 (2014): 71-88.

their identity - coherent, though (somewhat necessarily) simplified images of the past, or a relative progression at best. Ultimately, it ought to be remembered that both texts and spoken testimonies are, in fact, mere illusions of the past. For history in its definite range remains elusive. Literally, a historian could be compared to a person with blurred vision who is allowed to touch the rich dress of Klio, he can tell its design, differentiate many decorations, and even sense the overall allure, yet he shall never be allowed to thoroughly comprehend the muse's image. However, an intricate question follows, is the latter indeed necessary in order to be constructive and aspire for the new?

In light of recent trends of educating history as interactively and suggestively as possible, proof of which can be found in new conceptions of museums exhibitions, it is important to remember that oral history corresponds well with the idea of a historical experience. Naturally, it is not wise to overrate spoken accounts as a means of understanding national or social ancestry, for oral history definitely has its limits, as previously underlined. However, it certainly is a branch of history that deserves recognition and promotion in the society.<sup>60</sup> To conclude, perhaps there would be no more meaningful sentence than a paraphrase of a famous quote of the Polish priest, Jan Twardowski: "Let us hasten to listen to people, they depart so quickly".<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Similarly: *Preparing the Next Generation...*, p. 123 and further.

<sup>61</sup> Jan Twardowski, *Który stwarzasz jagody: wiersze wybrane*, (Kraków: Wydawn. Literackie, 1990) 122 (transl. by author).

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