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**“In empirical research it’s good  
to have a bit of luck  
and then seize the opportunity...”  
On the methodology  
of the “Three Ukrainian Revolutions”  
research project – an interview  
with prof. Georges Mink**

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Przemysław Pazik: *Interviewing is both about science and art. What is your experience with this research method? Which of your lessons can be used for the 3R project and maybe by other budding researchers<sup>1</sup>?*

Georges Mink: Let me go back to the time of my university studies. My scientific history starts at the time when social sciences were subject to major ideological pressures and research methodology was marked by clashes between positivists, on the one hand, and Marxists and post-Marxists thinkers as proponents of qualitative methods on the other. I witnessed these clashes during my early years at the University of Warsaw where I was the student of Stefan Nowak and Zygmunt Bauman. The former, a positivist, valued more standardized quantitative methodologies which resembled a laboratory-type approach. On the other hand, there was the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was written within the framework of the “3 Revolutions” project implemented by the College of Europe in Natolin.

universalist school of thought which predicated “planetary” and unfalsifiable rights. I witnessed the same sort of confrontation two years later, between 1968–1972, when I studied at Sorbonne. In the context of multi-dimensional conflicts between the left and the right wing sociologies, heated quasi-political debates were held between the proponents of comparative methods, inspired by exact science, and a strong fraction of advocates of qualitative studies, based among others, on methods derived from ethnologies and social and political anthropologies, which were gaining ground in Paris at that time. This was the time of the major influence of a positivist American school introduced to France, and to Poland as well, by Paul Lazarsfeld. The key protagonist figure behind this movement was Raymond Boudon. On the other side of the scale, there were Marxists or sociologists who promoted qualitative techniques. I grew up out of this “qualitative” versus “quantitative” battle: I learnt that both camps may be right depending on the specific research topic and the context. In this dispute, I define myself as an agnostic. Yet, this dispute guided me towards the crux of the matter: I came to understand that research techniques and tools should be selected bearing in their optimum efficiency for the tested research problems and hypotheses and the available financing. That is why I turned out to be more eclectic than the majority of my fellow researchers and why I combined both quantitative and qualitative orientations in my research projects. Fortunately, today this dispute is no longer of importance.

PP: *What were the key lessons learned by you as a seasoned researcher?*

GM: I believe that for me, the turning point came with my studies on sociologists from Central and Eastern Europe and on their relations with people in power who claimed their exclusive right to diagnose social problems or even imposed the prevailing research paradigm in social science, i.e. the triangular social structure devoid of class antagonisms. The triangle was built around the working class, the farmers’ class and the intelligentsia, with all three sections living in friendly relations. This was a utopian, quasi-totalitarian paradigm, enshrined in the Constitution, which must have fostered the renewal of sociological milieus. I was particularly interested in the mutual evolution of respective positions in this system. In that project I collected interviews in three countries and asked my interviewees in-depth, probing questions, based on a pre-designed questionnaire. Because free-narrative investigation interviews would be of no use, I decided to rely

on the semi-structured technique. I wanted to map the positions taken by sociologists on the continuum spanning from the role of “the prince’s advisor” to that of “the clandestine opposition activist”.

The second major breakthrough came along with the study of the double life experience of intellectual immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe: i.e. life in their country of origin and in the place of emigration or, in other words, first in the State that could be at least labelled authoritarian and next in a democratic country. Again, I relied on the interview method, but this time the tool was very specific, and I was able to probe into deeper layers of the interviewees’ memory, and to push them to make real comparisons between a totalitarian State and a liberal country. To this end, we devised a special research tool which was split into three parts. First, there was a free-narrative phase which lasted quite long, around 45 minutes. This phase was used to collect classical oral histories. Next, in the second phase, we focused on some specific issues. All of a sudden, a free-talking respondent was confronted with specific questions. This caused stress, which, although unpleasant for the interviewee, elicited dissonance, adjustments and new memories. In the third phase, we attempted to draw a summary of this double life, a synthesis of two lives. The approach enabled us to elicit in the narrating individual the heroic-like stance and a critical position towards themselves and towards others. The need to leave behind the “whitewashing” and the “forgetting” must have caused tensions. Yet, we managed to collect nearly 100 interviews, and to confront qualitative data with multi-factor analyses.

The third experience was about the research project on the life paths of communist elite members in Central and Eastern Europe confronted with the collapse of the system of power. The project spanned over Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia. We started with general hypotheses which were first suggested by a number of sociologists, and next became instrumentalized by politicians. We took on board, among all, the theses of Jadwiga Staniszkis on political capitalism or those of Elemér Hankiss about “the Great Coalition” (between the nomenklatura and private businesses). The instrumentalization enacted by politicians manifested itself in a narrative about communists who, through the looting of public property and steering of the transition process, managed to get a head start for themselves. These hypotheses had to be tested. We were lucky because at that time, quantitative studies were also under way, coordinated by the University of California, Los Angeles, with the support of national research teams. In

Poland, for instance, the team was directed by Edmund Wnuk Lipiński and Jacek Wasilewski. These efforts led to the refutation of the thesis that all former apparatchiks were winners in the transition process. It was actually, as Wasilewski named it, “the revolution of deputy directors” who had moved to the private sector. They accounted for 25% of the whole nomenklatura. In the remaining group, 25% actually lost their jobs and were unable to find their way in this new reality, and the rest decided to follow a number of new life paths, with some deciding to stay in politics.

Based on these findings, together with Jean-Charles Szurek, I posed the question of how a member of the nomenklatura, having a deeply entrenched faith in the prevailing dogma of the State control over economy and the so-called “social” ownership, would decide to make a volte-face and become a shrewd capitalism builder. To this end, we decided to use a loosely structured interview. On the one hand, we knew that respondents should be given the opportunity to talk freely about their experiences from 1987, 1988 and 1989. On the other hand, we needed to literally press them up against a wall with very specific questions. However, in order for the approach to be successful, we had to set up a trusting atmosphere: we were then at the early stages of the transition process when their prevailing climate was to hunt for former nomenklatura members converted into private businessmen. There was at least one thing that played to our advantage: as a matter of fact, as people who were coming from the West, we were perceived as brokers in prospective business contacts. Second of all, we needed to seize all windows of opportunities on our way. At that time, a lot of ink was spilt about the public property being taken over by the former nomenklatura so these people were *a priori* afraid to talk. That’s why we first needed to create a trusting setting, and next move on to discuss sensitive questions. We relied on different triggers. As a personal anecdote I can tell you that my wife was a member of the French Socialist Party. Former communist activists often tried to get the membership in the Socialist International as a way of legitimizing their new social democratic orientation. My wife barred them that way by claiming that they were communists. Once they discovered that we were in a relationship, they thought that maybe I was an envoy of the Socialist International sent on a mission to check their reliability as the proponents of the liberal system. This made them more talkative.

In political research, you must seize opportunities that pop up along the way. This is particularly true when you talk to people who have a lot to hide and are inclined to embellish the truth either because of their past or future

political career. In case of the 3R project, the favorable circumstance was that during our recorded interview with Yulia Tymoshenko we also talked to a man who was among those rare European politicians who had paid her the visit when she was in prison. Thanks to him, it was easier for us to depart from the convention of a media-like interview which Mrs. Tymoshenko was perfectly accustomed to. The atmosphere of trust and a feeling of some debt to be paid paved the way for a more in-depth conversation. In other circumstances this conversation would not have taken place or would have been very dissatisfactory.

PP: *Let's move to the 3R project. You've mentioned your conversation with Yulia Tymoshenko. You also recorded interviews with some grass root participants in the events, with volunteers and with journalists. At the same time, oral history, as a research method, has been adopted as a starting point by the 3R team which gathers historians, sociologists and political scientists. What's the difference between the method used in the project and the traditional oral history approach?*

GM: First of all, the 3R project, as you have aptly put it, is not only about history. In the language of political science our endeavor could be defined as the study of social movements or the mobilization around some revolutionary trend. We assume that the events which took place in Ukraine were a revolution. Thus, the nature of the topic and the research approach entails *quasi* automatically that the method should be more comprehensive and more multi-layered than traditional oral history. We do not only want to collect facts which were experienced and which are now reproduced by people in the form of discourse collected as their oral histories.

Our goal is the same as the one pursued by other "hard" social sciences, political science, sociology and political anthropology: to determine some correlations, some causalities. We are learning what has happened, and we are checking whether it actually happened or not. That's why we cross-check diverse oral histories and use methods which enable to check and correlate a number of facts. For instance, in the analysis of "the Revolution on Granite" we already know that there was no mass bottom-up movement and that everything happened "at the top", among the elites. Based on these facts we could ask respondents about what they were doing during this revolution, and, at the same time, try to learn *why* they behaved in a certain way. This is a way to check whether they did not rely on self-censorship,

from the fear that probably not all had been actually played out yet at the time. Don't forget that it was still the soviet era. That's how the declining regime influenced the behavior of people involved in the "bottom-up" revolution. Such occurrences could be superficially revealed through oral history but become fully visible only when inquired upon with another tool, e.g. semi-structured interview, i.e. a type of talk where after a free-narrative phase when the interviewee talks about his/her life, he/she is asked a series of detailed questions, and is requested to look for self-explanations for various causes underlying in such events.

Second of all, it should be emphasized that revolutions tend to be extremely complex in nature. We know more or less about the sequence of events that took place in Ukraine. Now, we want to know how these events were perceived, and here oral history can be an interesting tool. Moreover, we want to understand the hidden political mechanism behind these events, e.g. how the selection of activists was organized. Answers to these sort of questions can only be found through listening to a free and generally uninterrupted narrative of the eye witness. Our task is to ask some filtering questions. Let me give you an example. It does not come from the 3R project but is emblematic of the need to reflect on hidden variables. Some time ago, in France, research was carried out with special focus on WWII. These studies relied to a great extent on data collected through witness interviews. Some questions referred to soldiers from French colonies, in particular Moroccans. When asked about Moroccan soldiers, some respondents swore blind that they had actually seen them with the ears of Nazi soldiers hanging from their belts. It turned out that nothing of that sort had happened. No Moroccan soldiers displayed enemies' ears attached to their belts. This image was triggered by racist attitudes which were on the rise in France at the time when the research data was collected. Respondents tended to match their currently held patterns with their past memories. This example shows the need to use some additional filtering for individual narratives.

*PP: More importantly, the 3R research project is based on a heterogeneous sample of interviewees: we are interviewing Ukrainians, people from Germany, Lithuania and from Poland. Interviews are held with so-called "average people" as well as with politicians. Is it possible to study such a diverse sample with a single method, a single questionnaire?*

GM: I would not draw a rigid demarcation line here between different methodologies; as a matter of fact, you can easily find a project where data is collected through interviews where the same questions are addressed to people coming from different backgrounds. If this is the case, the “metrics” of the interview is of the utmost importance in order to identify the sex, age, social status and education of respondents. In the case of the 3R project, these variables are a must.

At the same time, you are absolutely right when asking whether in order to grasp the very sense of events it is plausible to use the same comprehensive methodology to interview a lady who did cooking tasks at Maidan Square and Yulia Tymoshenko – a player from the political elite. There is a researcher in France, Samy Choen, who specializes in studying elites, and in particular, political leaders. He was the one to ask whether François Mitterrand could be interviewed in the same way as the average citizen. We came across the same question with Jean-Charles Szurek during our research on adaptation strategies adopted by communists during the transition from one political system to another. We wanted to know whether a middle-level member of the nomenklatura could be interviewed in the same manner as, for instance, such political leaders as Leszek Miller or Aleksander Kwaśniewski. Of course, we found out that he couldn't. To do so, we needed some more comprehensive questions, otherwise we would have skipped a number of details, and the interviewee could have embellished his own role in the third Republic of Poland, and the one played previously in the dismantling of the communist regime.

PP: *As a matter of fact, politicians are not the only ones who embellish reality...*

GM: Of course not. Here, it's worth highlighting some facts about the interviewee-interviewer relationship. Fortunately, in social science, thanks to the accumulated methodological literature, based for instance on the assertions by Ervin Goffmann or by people working on individual symbolic interactions, we already know for quite some time what the scope of the challenge is. Even if someone consents to an interview, neither the interviewee nor the interviewer are tabula rasa. There is a theatricalization effect at play: the interviewer can be quite knowledgeable of the rules of the game. He will not be condescending and will try to ease the tension. Yet, during an interview such tension cannot be entirely lifted. The interviewee feels either intimidated or, on the

contrary, gets nervous and the conversation heats up. Add the heroization (glorification) effect to that: the interviewee's desire to present his/her role in the events in a better light. This is important for the historian who has to be aware of differences between a neutral description of reality and the language of subjectivity fostered either by human complexes or by interaction. Any conversation entails an on-going dramatization, and it's never enough to put up a microphone and say "please talk".

In the context of the 3R project, this danger could be fully exemplified by an interview with a far right representative. Let's say that we would like to test the actual impact of the far right movement, but we know that the far right groups are now being subject to stigmatization in Europe. Moreover, the far right people want to stay in Europe too, even if it is not a Europe depicted by their prevailing vision. Then, you need to remember that an interviewee from the far right group will use self-censorship and will try to whitewash its group's doings by glossing over contents which are commonly considered as unacceptable and by highlighting those which are well perceived in Europe. This trap could be thought through at the preliminary reflection stage, before moving to the interview phase, and through so-called pilot studies where the questionnaire is tested on a small group, before being used on the proper research sample.

*PP: Let's conclude our talk with the relation between oral and written sources. Does the interview or oral history complement research based on traditional sources or does it replace such research?*

GM: An important argument in favor of oral history is based on the assumption that, especially when studying institutions, documents can be missing and the interview helps fill this gap. In the case of the 3R project, some documents may be concealed or are less accessible and an interview is the best tool to establish some facts. But, I keep repeating that everything will depend on the actual circumstances: sometimes cross-checked interviews will suffice, sometimes you will need to go further because your interviewees may come across some stumbling blocks. Such obstacles can only be understood and overcome through document analysis.

Oral history holds its own place in France and is approached in a very comprehensive way there. One of the researchers, Daniel Bertaux, proved that a skillfully oriented oral history can reveal more than quantitative studies. A discussion was held in France on why some occupations are passed



from generation to generation even if they are no longer financially attractive. When studying the walks of life of bakers, in times when the growing mechanization could lead to conclusions that the occupation would soon disappear, based on collected life stories, Bertaux proved that this group held a strong, and nearly family-rooted professional ethos. In other words, the example shows that some hidden variables existed – ethos in the case – which undermined the importance of the financial argument.

PP: *Our interview shows that oral history can be a proficient research tool, but entails some loss of innocence.*

GM: Definitely so. Listening to the witness is not enough: sometimes you need to confront the respondent with alternative narratives or with detailed questions. You need to put him/her under some stress to reach deeper layers of his/her memories. I can quote the example of the emblematic research by father Patric Debois here on the so-called “Holocaust by bullets”, i.e. the period before the start of the extermination of European Jews in death camps. The so-called by-standers – witnesses of the events – often turned out to be helpful participants. No such assertion appeared in the first narrative wave. This was revealed once they had been confronted with the crime site and put to a more in-depth interview. The by-stander (narrator) had to be confronted with the need to review the assessment of his/her own conduct and the conduct of others. Not doing so would have meant failure to understand their self-censored reality. The method is not about collecting the stream of words but about probing their very sense in order to extract the real causes and motivations.