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The folklore studies context of oral history

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Abstract

Folkloristic studies of oral histories in colloquial circulation emphasize the value of narrative oral sources (direct transmission), as they enable qualitative analysis of narrative interviews, subsequently used by various scholarly disciplines. The experiences of folklorists significantly facilitate and enrich the interpretation of the processes of formation and functioning of cultural communities and, above all, allow one to discern reasons for the qualitative differences in such interpretations, the differences ascribable to the contemporary context of reporting knowledge about past events.

Keywords

methodology, spoken history, family history, secret memories, folklore narrative analysis, situational aspects of folklore, narrativization of reminiscence stories, oral history



The rapid development of folklore research on reminiscence stories since the 1950s concurred with similar advances in oral history method, itself primarily a new name for a time-tested folklore research method, successfully implemented in field research. "It [oral history] is basically nothing more than a new name for the old practice of dialectologists and folklorists [...] of recording oral texts of so-called ordinary people"¹ – rightly stated Jerzy Bartmiński. Unfortunately, the folklore studies' contribution to the methodology of oral history commonly remains unnoticed: since folklorists failed to disseminate the results of their own research, 'autobiographical narratives' or 'oral history' are touted as recent, exciting research methods.²

And yet, the concept of narrative, initially associated only with literary and folklore studies, has become a key interpretive category in contemporary philosophy, sociology, history, psychology and anthropology: narratives as interpretive paradigms are employed in descriptions of human identity, here understood as construable in the course of social interaction while describing one's own position. The theoretical foundations of the narrative interview (in essence, a continuous recording of an interlocutor's narration of his or her own experiences, or recommendations for audio or video recordings of such narratives),³ developed by sociologists or psychologists, underscore the importance of theoretical underpinnings of folklorists' tested field research methods. Nevertheless, researchers of folklore have prioritized documenting traditional themes in circulating folk tales or observing the expression of traditional values and behaviours, neglecting the theorization of their own research field. Accordingly, one cannot begrudge sociologists and historians the supposed originality of their refinements of the narrative interview method, since folklore studies as a field has simply failed to promote their own research methods among researchers working in other disciplines.

Admittedly, the manner of preserving interviews for posterity from the very beginning shifted in accordance with technical means available to the researcher.

- 1 J. Bartmiński, *O wartościach słowa mówionego*, in S. Niebierzegowska-Bartmińska, S. Wasiauta (eds.), *Historia mówiona w świetle etnolingwistyki*, Lublin 2008, p. 9.
- 2 J. Le Goff (quoting Joseph Goy) states that oral history as an academic discipline was first taught at American universities in 1952–1959, subsequently to be taught in Canada, England and France, cf. J. Le Goff, *Historia i pamięć*, transl. A. Gronowska, J. Stryjczyk, Warszawa 2007, pp. 153–154; see also: P. Filipkowski, *Historia mówiona i wojna. Doświadczenia obozu koncentracyjnego w perspektywie narracji biograficznych*, Wrocław 2010.
- 3 G. Riemann, F. Schütz, *'Trajektoria' jako podstawowa koncepcja teoretyczna w analizach cierpienia i bezładnych procesów społecznych*, transl. Z. Bokszański, A. Piotrowski, 'Kultura i Społeczeństwo,' vol. 36, no. 2, 1992, pp. 89–109.

It is difficult to conclude that the use of a specific medium, tape recorder or video tapes to preserve the oral statement marks the birth of a modern research method. The manner of recording matters only inasmuch as it facilitates a fully reliable log of the interlocutor's statements. More significant, however, are analytical and interpretive approaches applied to the collected oral material, to be employed by researchers in a range of disciplines, and not by historians only. "Every discipline relies on oral testimonies collected in its particular way, every discipline uses this information in its own way and according to the subject matter of its interest; at the same time, every discipline has its share of difficulties arising and benefits accruing from the use of oral sources."⁴ Jerzy Bartmiński follows David Dunaway in his belief that folklorists contributed greatly to the development of the oral history method, because the object of their interest "is not the historical accuracy of the life narrative, but rather the formulaic way in which traditional motifs and plot threads are expressed and handled."⁵

Considering the multifaceted nature of oral history, Bartmiński firstly draws attention to its two different modes: spontaneous oral history and organized oral history. The latter type lies beyond the scope of this analysis, since, in my opinion, it is more properly classified as folklore manufactured by cultural institutions (for example, those that hold storytelling competitions and/or story-tellers' feasts). On the other hand, when considering the so-called spontaneous oral history, Jerzy Bartmiński (in a footnote) clarifies that, "[t]he correct translation of the English term into Polish would equal oral history [*historia ustna*]; however, I continue to use the already widespread Polish coinage of spoken history [*historia mówiona*], being aware of its conventionality and inadequacy (because historical sources passed down in speech also include, for example, chronicle songs and the Second World War partisan songs)."⁶ When clarifying the term of spontaneous oral history, Bartmiński notes that:

[...] it is made up by the people, who tell stories, recollect about times gone by, spin tall tales, pass on rumours and gossip, sometimes with a grain of salt, all these being described as murmured propaganda. Oral histories arise in families and local communities, in virtually every cohesive and close-knit community, and create their own environmental history,

4 D.K. Dunaway, *Introduction. The Interdisciplinarity of Oral History*, in D.K. Dunaway, W.K. Baum (eds.), *Oral History. An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, London-New Delhi 1996, p. 10; qtd in: J. Bartmiński, *Historia mówiona - interdyscyplinarna i wieloaspektowa*, in S. Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska, J. Szaruda, M. Szumiło (eds.), *Historia mówiona w świetle nauk humanistycznych i społecznych*, Lublin 2014, p. 12.

5 J. Bartmiński, *Historia mówiona...*, p. 13.

6 *Ibidem*, p. 10. The literal meaning of Polish nomenclature stands in opposition to the English preference for oral history (transl. note).

for better or worse, mostly remembered selectively. We can describe this **common practice of storytelling** as ‘spontaneous,’ natural oral history; much attention has been paid to it by linguists and folklorists.⁷

Regrettably, Bartmiński neither appreciated this ‘common practice of storytelling’ nor recognized it as a proper research subject in contemporary folklore studies; moreover, his article does not discuss the ‘spontaneous’ spoken history in any greater detail.

Slovak folklorist Milan Leščák, referring to Claude Lévi-Strauss’ concept of weak (biographical, anecdotal) and strong (described) history, analyses ethnological aspects of oral history studies, which he perceives as ‘orally transmitted history’ (*história v úst-nom podaní*), a focal point of interest for many scholarly disciplines.⁸ Appreciating the value of such transmissions, Leščák first draws our attention to their cultural context: spoken (oral) history, undoubtedly ‘spontaneous’ and linked to a variety of past events, is passed down in families and small local communities, shaping the sociohistorical consciousness. Not only associated with traditional folklore genres (tales, legends), spoken history survives in above all in recollected stories (*rozprávania zo života, spomienkové rozprávania*). The analysis of such stories proves that recalled facts do not record historiographical information *per se* but rather individual experiences, evaluated according to the socially-instilled value system. Therefore, according to Milan Leščák, the most effective research method to be used by scholars working in a number of different disciplines is the ‘biographical method and its variants’. On the other hand, Leščák claims, if folklorists were not to record ‘oral histories’ and other supplementary orally transmitted information, they would not be able to analyse the semantic background and multifaceted functions of the studied cultural phenomena.⁹

In turn, Zuzana Profantová, having analysed memory and oral history from the perspective of ethnology, clearly emphasized the significance of previous research on traditional folklore genres (memoirs and life stories, but also historical songs, ballads, legends, or anecdotes) to studies on the mechanism of formation, consolidation and transformation of historical memory: such studies reveal the manner of recounting one’s own experiences and testimonies, interpreting one’s own fate and creating a consistent world picture. Apart from individual narratives, historical memories are also recorded in archival materials (fiction and all written sources: notes, letters, diaries, plus photographs, audiovisual recordings and documentary films). The analysis of oral history demands acquiring a wide range of documentary materials, which is why Profantová believes that it is possible to present ‘oral chronicles’ (*ústne dejiny*),

7 *Ibidem* (emphasis by JHN).

8 M. Leščák, *Etnologické aspekty štúdia orálnej histórie*, ‘Etnologické Rozpravy,’ vol. 2, 1996, p. 8.

9 *Ibidem*, p. 7. See also: M. Leščák, *Folklór ako forma sociálnej komunikácie*, ‘Slovenský Národopis,’ vol. 3-4, 2002, pp. 318-330.

especially in post-socialist countries of today.¹⁰ What is more, Profantová avers, oral history as a new ‘multidiscipline’ is being ‘created as we speak’: a specific research method that enables qualitative analyses of narrative interviews by representatives of various scholarly disciplines.¹¹

Relevantly, one should recall here the methodological reflection of Michael H. Frisch, a prominent American scholar of oral history and public history, who calls for “putting the oral back in oral history” because “in most of its uses, oral history deals not with the spoken but with the written word.”¹² According to Frisch, when representatives of the so-called new history school use sources obtained through the oral history method of interview-to-text-transcription, they seriously hinder an in-depth understanding of the collected material. Therefore, in his view, instead of textual transcription, we should use digitized narratives in audiovisual form:

The meanings and senses of the words in question lie in the contexts in which they appear, gestures, intonation, body language, how they are expressed, pauses and **the whole performative sphere of the recorded relationship**. The moment we limit our search to textual transcription alone, we lose the opportunity to discover, explore, draw conclusions from and share the richness of all aspects of oral history testimony.¹³

Thus, the historian’s conclusions align with postulates made by cultural studies scholars, among them folklorists in particular, who have long put special emphasis on how the creation of oral narratives depends on the context of the folklore situation. The use of digital technology to collect, analyse and compare the amassed documentation will undoubtedly provide quick and unrestricted access to materials; one expects fascinating effects of applying such technology to the creation of oral history collections (mainly in the form of websites) and ways of indexing materials.¹⁴

The greatest contribution to the debate seems to be that of Marta Kurkowska-Budzan, who claims that “oral history has brought narrative oral sources back into

10 The post-1989 political transformation in Central European countries resulted in previously excluded communities being given a voice in public discourse, rapidly accelerating the development of oral history research, enabling a process of democratization and ‘revitalization’ of collective memory. Cf. D. Kałwa, *Historia mówiona w krajach postkomunistycznych. Rekonesans*, ‘Kultura i Historia,’ vol. 18, 2010, www.kulturaihistoria.umcs.pl/en/archiwes/1887 (accessed: 20.07.2023).

11 Z. Profantová, *Pamät’ a oral history z pohľadu etnológie*, in J. Adamowski, M. Wójcicka (eds.), *Pamięć jako kategoria rzeczywistości*, vol. 6, Lublin 2012, p. 152.

12 M. Frisch, *Oral History and Digital Revolution: Toward a Post-Documentary Sensibility*, transl. M. Kierzkowski, in E. Domańska (ed.) *Teoria wiedzy o przeszłości na tle współczesnej humanistyki*, Poznań 2010, pp. 295–296.

13 *Ibidem*, p. 296 (emphasis by JHN).

14 *Ibidem*, pp. 298–310.

favour.”¹⁵ Emphasizing cultural anthropology’s influence on historical research, she clearly remains under its methodological influence when she declares:

I am a historian who is concerned not with documenting the past but with searching for it in the present. I am interested in what makes history come alive and poignant for people today, how it becomes an impetus for their actions [...]. I believe that a past that no longer exists remains present and relevant to our contemporaries through [...] memory.¹⁶

The collection and interpretation of oral accounts, which is emphatically the main goal of the modern oral history research, will fulfil different aims in every scholarly discipline. Thus, data from the same source may result in very different interpretive works.¹⁷

Personally – declares Wiktoria Kudela-Świątek – I perceive oral history interviews as a method which, after a fashion, combines various scholarly disciplines and allows for a multilayered reading of stories about remembered events. Were we to remain within the traditional (illustrative) approach to the sources of oral history (which is still practised by many humanities scholars), we would not be able to learn how the narrators interpreted the past reality, or, more precisely, what images of the ‘past’ they created, they still cultivate and they will pass on to future generations.¹⁸

Undoubtedly, the understanding of oral history as spoken and, in my opinion, primarily narrated history has legitimized the application of folkloristic methods to the testimony analysis, relegating to the background (but, by no means, detracting from) the informational value of recorded interviews. Analysed through the lens of folklore studies, a reminiscence story is not so much an individual utterance but an expression of one’s social group’s opinion on a given topic. Hence, the manner of narration is simultaneously determined by the narrative tradition of a given community (the use of motifs and plot threads present in colloquial circulation) and by the shared world picture at a given time; therefore, the construction of narratives obeys the concept of ‘truth’ as valid in a given community, thus contributing to creation of its cultural identity.¹⁹

15 M. Kurkowska-Budzan, *Historia zwykłych ludzi. Współczesna angielska historiografia dziejów społecznych*, Kraków 2003, p. 177.

16 M. Kurkowska-Budzan, *Historia ‘samorosta’: narracje o powojennym podziemiu zbrojnym w Łomżyńskim*, ‘Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa,’ vol. 1, 2011, p. 45.

17 Cf. W. Kudela-Świątek, *Interdyscyplinarność w badaniach oral history: konieczność czy sposób na nowatorstwo?*, in S. Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska, J. Szaruda, M. Szumiło (eds.), *Historia mówiona w świetle nauk humanistycznych...*, op. cit., pp. 61–78.

18 *Ibidem*, p. 83.

19 Further notes on that issue to be found in J. Hajduk-Nijakowska, *Doświadczenie pamięci. Folklorystyczny kontekst opowieści wspomnieniowych*, Opole 2016.

Of particular importance in the formation of identity is family memory – especially, I underscore, when it stands in sharp contrast to official, institutional, state-sanctioned memory. Paul Thompson, one of the pioneers of oral history research, emphasized that

family history especially can give an individual a strong sense of a much longer personal lifespan, which will even survive their own death. [...] The use of interviews as a source by professional historians is long-standing and perfectly compatible with scholarly standards. [...] It can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place.²⁰

Hence, a historian receives an opportunity to obtain new testimonies, but securing them necessitates acquiring new skills: “historians as field-workers, while in important respects retaining the advantages of professional knowledge, also find themselves off their desks, sharing experience on a human level.”²¹

The analysis of reminiscence stories transmitted through families not only provides the family with an interpretation of its communal memory but foremostly reveals the manner in which the local community understands and perceives the world and its closest environment, since ‘uttered’ memories influence the sphere of social relations. In such situations, family reminiscences often acquire traits of secret memory,²² i.e. memories that, for various reasons, are not disclosed to strangers and they are passed on (and cultivated) mainly within the family, among local trusted people and one’s own relatives. Secret memories are kept from strangers, who are perceived as posing a real threat. Various conceptualized and named by researchers, secret memory is perhaps the strongest in-group integrative factor, providing the community with a sense of its own uniqueness and often shaping group’s self-perception as a stigmatized minority. The communal memory, in turn, co-creates local identity, growing out of the strong ties of family and group community, pulsating with emotions and human (communal) actions. Most importantly: past (historical) events are always presented from a contemporary perspective.²³ The memory gives us the chance to identify events in relation to

20 P. Thompson, *Voice of the Past. Oral History*, Oxford 2003, pp. 2-3.

21 *Ibidem*, p. 9.

22 И.А. Разумова, analysing contemporary Russian family folklore, also drew attention to the once-concealed facts that can only now be discussed openly (e.g. the ‘wrong’ origin of one’s ancestor); see *Семейный фольклор*, in С. Ю. Неклюдов (ed.), *Современный городской фольклор*, Москва 2003, p. 576.

23 This does not only apply to reminiscence stories and popular narratives. Jerzy Topolski points out that historians may find themselves in a similar situation: “Historical facts coexist [...] - through knowledge of them - constantly with the present; the past melds at every moment with what is happening at the moment, reproduces itself at every moment, lives in each of us”; see J. Topolski, *Świat bez historii*, Warszawa 1976, p. 206.

touchstone memories of others, to identify moments of particular importance in the group's life (according to its current outlook), and, by analysing the way in which accounts are authenticated and the formulas that verify the veracity of the content are conveyed, to acquire material for reconstructing the concept of 'truth' as held in a given community.²⁴ After all, the analysis of a story according to the folklore paradigm tells us more about the narrators and about the context in which the narrative (and its transformations in time) took place.

The folkloristic context of contemporary reminiscence stories can undoubtedly enrich both anthropological and historical interpretations of biographical narratives. After all, each of these disciplines, using direct/oral sources of transmission, aims at a deeper analysis of the functioning of social memory. "We ask slightly different questions, distribute accents differently, use slightly different terminology of our own, but I think we are generally heading in the same direction"²⁵ – said Dionizjusz Czubala, who in the course of his many years of field research has amassed a rich collection of memoir stories related to the Second World War and the Holocaust.²⁶

However, both the folklorist and the anthropologist pursue the analysis and interpretation of recorded reminiscence narratives to achieve goals different than those of the historian. "My field, ethnography, is not concerned with facts, but with what people talk about facts. What people talk about facts is 'foolishness' to the historian, so it is not surprising that, faced with the chimera of collective memory, the historian is mostly left helpless,"²⁷ asserted Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, who used many interesting reminiscence stories, recorded today among the inhabitants of Sandomierz and the surrounding area, in the second part of her monograph entitled *Legendy o krwi* (Legends of Blood),²⁸ devoted to the memory of the Jews and the Holocaust. More recently, in a work entitled *Pod klątwą. Społeczny portret pogromu kieleckiego* (Under the curse. A social portrait of the Kielce pogrom), the author explained the subtitle of her huge two-volume publication by stating that it constitutes "an attempt to use the methods available to historical anthropology – queries and critical micro-analysis, to allow us to see the pogrom through the eyes of as many witnesses as possible."²⁹ Accordingly, she analysed

24 J. Hajduk-Nijakowska, *Problematyka badań nad świadomością historyczną w folklorze*, 'Etnografia Polska,' vol. 29, no. 1, 1985, pp. 105–109.

25 D. Czubala, A. Kozera, *Opowiadania z życia czy oral history*, in *idem*, *Wojenne opowieści wspomnieniowe*, Kielce 2012, p. 39.

26 D. Czubala, *Pamięć Zagłady w narracji folklorystycznej*, 'Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały,' vol. 13, 2017, pp. 203–229.

27 J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Rzeczy mgliste. Eseje i studia*, Sejny 2004, p. 17.

28 See J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Legendy o krwi. Antropologia przesądu (z cyklu: Obraz osobliwy)*, Warszawa 2008.

29 J. Tokarska-Bakir, *Pod klątwą. Społeczny portret pogromu kieleckiego*, vol. 1, Warszawa 2018, p. 15.

the social and cultural context of the Jewish pogrom in Kielce after the Second World War, cited dozens of documented accounts and testimonies to explain the driving force behind the Jewish ritual murder libel (blood libel), showcasing how it influenced local thinking about the Jews. She proved that “the context of the rumour that caused the Kielce pogrom is an ecclesiastical legend about Jewish ritual murders (blood libel), spreading across Europe since at least the 12th century”³⁰ and popularized in Poland mainly by the *Lives of the Saints* of Piotr Skarga, intertwined with an international folklore belief about children’s blood being added to matzah (motif no. V361 in Aarne-Thompson’s Tale Type Index). “There is also no doubt about the connection,” she goes on to write, “between the Catholic cults of the Innocents and the rumours circulating in Kielce about transfusions. These rumours were a modernization of the legend of blood being squeezed into matzah.”³¹ Further documents collected by the author in the second volume of the monograph corroborate these statements and reveal the cultural context of the belief in the veracity of these reported events, especially as some of the accounts were not written down until the second half of the 1990s.

* * * * *

The secret memory, enduring despite constant clashes with official memory (supported by institutional safeguards), further reinforces cultural trauma, as Piotr Sztompka put it:

[...] internalized as a result of socialization, the culture that [people] carry ‘in their heads’ or in semi-automatic ‘sentiments of the heart’ clashes with a different, external cultural environment. [...] The most visible manifestation of trauma is that people talk about it and want to address it somehow. If they cannot talk about it in public, they more than make up for it, even under the most repressive regimes, in their private circle of family, friends and acquaintances,³²

which leads, especially in intergenerational transmission, to a refinement of the details of events, i.e., the fictionalization and mythicization of the transmitted story.

Under that definition, such a traumatic community of memory, knitting itself tighter and tighter over the years, focusing around its ‘core’ and thus having (often to this day) the character of a secret memory – is, without doubt, the Silesian community. This process largely came about due to the historical policy of the Polish state implemented after the Second World War, to the ideological

30 *Ibidem*, p. 118.

31 *Ibidem*, p. 119.

32 P. Sztompka, *Trauma wielkiej zmiany. Społeczne koszty transformacji*, Warszawa 2000, pp. 32, 37.

assumptions underlying the process of symbolic ‘appropriation’ of the space of the Western and Northern Territories of Poland:³³ in practice, the policy resulted in the eradication of German tradition in these lands, often through the destruction of material traces of foreign culture.

For the Second World War brought to the inhabitants of Upper Silesia experiences so different from those of the Poles living under German and Soviet occupation that the trauma of the Silesian citizens of the Polish state of those years still lingers in their contemporary collective memory, especially since official and state-promoted memory has for years obstructed attempts to reveal and publicize Silesian narratives from the Polish-German borderland. Burdened with a sense of rejection, injustice and lack of understanding, the Silesian family memory was therefore cultivated, co-creating local (also differentiated, regional) colloquial memories of Silesian martyrdom. Stories about traumatic events, about the behaviour of Soviet soldiers in captured Silesian towns (assaults, robberies, rapes, deportation of men to Siberia and to forced labour in the mines of the Donbass), as well as about repressions and acts of terror of the then Polish authorities against Silesians, gradually began to make their way into public circulation only after the political transformation in Poland in 1989.

Example one: In January 1945, when the front stopped on the Oder River, the Red Army soldiers occupied the village of Boguszyce in the Opole region and inflicted brutal violence upon its inhabitants: entire families, including infants and old people, were shot, with most of the farms burnt down. Nearly 300 villagers and about 150 other people,³⁴ including forced labourers, were killed at the time. The memory of these events was kept secret.

The first months of the ‘rule’ of the Rusyns (as the Soviets were called in the Silesian dialect) in the Opole region were remembered above all as a time of bestial arbitrary violence on the part of the soldiers, especially in regard to rapes of women. Although, after a few months, the Red Army handed over power to the Poles,³⁵ the latter, as is well known, by taking over the so-called Western and Northern Territories on behalf of the communist government, promoted the official ideological interpretation of ‘righting a historical injustice’ through the return of – as it was propagandistically termed – the so-called Piast territories to the Motherland, made possible by the alliance with the Soviet Union. For the Silesians, this role swap, the Polish recognition of their Soviet oppressors as liberators, underpinned the sharp

33 This refers to the areas of the former German East added to Poland as a consequence of the Second World War and propagandistically referred to as the Recovered Territories (editor’s note).

34 A. Dziurok, *Zbrodnie na Górnym Śląsku w roku 1945*, in G. Zielińska (ed.), *Konferencja. Tragedia Górnośląska 1945 - Warszawa 22 kwietnia 2015*, Warszawa 2015, pp. 14–15.

35 In the Opole region, however, the dual rule of the Red Army and Polish authorities lasted almost two years.

conflict between divergent communities of memory, reinforcing the sense of injustice and lack of understanding of their fate.

In 2014, Marcin Tumulka reached Boguszyce with Dariusz Panza, where they recorded, after nearly 70 years, the accounts of the seven still living witnesses to the events of January 1945. All of these people survived that tragedy, but, since they were young children at the time, over the years, their stories became enriched by information given by their parents or grandparents. In front of the camera, their stories, introduced in the film documentary *Untold '45*,³⁶ are still choked with painful remembered emotions and trauma, relived over and over again, mainly because each of witnesses 'sees' those events and 'sees' those stories. If their stories align in many respects, then it happens because their communally experienced tragedy has already been 'worked through' in local memory; nevertheless, every witness tells the story differently, creating their own 'pictorial' narrative and attempting to verbalize the image recorded in memory. The witnesses either gesticulate profusely or support the story with mimicry, are overcome with emotions or calmly relate the events, concentrate on conveying in words what they 'see' but sometimes drop their voice, cover their eyes and end the phrase with silence.

The people whose stories (oral histories) were recorded by the cameraman soon began to act as unique 'witnesses of the time' (especially when the Socio-Cultural Society of Germans sponsored the commemoration ceremonies of the Upper Silesian Tragedy in 2015). Participating in many public meetings on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of those events, at which film directed by Tumulka was screened, the now elderly inhabitants of Boguszyce repeated in front of the gathered audience, more and more skilfully, their reminiscences, later published by the local press. In this manner, stories about tragic events in Boguszyce became part of the common knowledge.³⁷

Example two: The so-called repressive labour camps set up after the war by the Polish Department of Security loom exceptionally tragic in the memory of Silesians. "The very establishment of the camps, as well as their persistence in the post-war reality, was a shock. Shrouded in mystery, they heightened the fear all the more. [...] These camps sometimes appear as outright concentration camps."³⁸ In addition to the largest camp in Świętochłowice (the so-called 'Zgoda'), the camp of Łambinowice/Lamsdorf near Niemodlin in the Opole region is most often mentioned. "During its existence in 1945-1946, it aroused fear and horror, - and then

36 *Nieopowiedziany '45 / Die nicht erzählte Geschichte*, dir. M. Tumulka, phot. A. Panza, K. Stanek, Zespół Producentcki ProFutura, 2014.

37 My analysis of narratives of witnesses of Boguszyce massacre were published in: *Doświadczenie pamięci...*, op. cit., pp. 133-147.

38 M.G. Gerlich, "My prawdziwi Górnoślązacy" ... *Studium etnologiczne*, Warszawa-Katowice 2010, pp. 160-161.

slowly became – mainly in Germany – a symbol of the crimes committed by the Poles against the German population immediately after the war.”³⁹

A careful analysis of all the narratives reveals that the years-long process of folklorization and fictionalization of these stories led to the creation of a kind of folk epic by the bearers of communal memory. Witness accounts blended together, images were enriched with new associations and interpretations, and letters, memoirs and books on the subject (above all, the pamphlet by camp doctor Heinz Esser, circulated in handwritten copies) percolated into the local Silesian community from Germany (secretly, of course), filling in the gaps in memory and modelling the narrative. In addition, these accounts were overlaid by film images from the Second World War, showing the abuse of prisoners by the guards. After all, the circumstances of the tortured man, regardless of who was torturing whom and in which camp, strongly resembled each other and it is not surprising that they also loomed large in the narratives concerning the Łambinowice camp. Although the witnesses to these events gradually passed away, the popularity of the subject itself in oral circulation simultaneously intensified, and the feeling of ‘that’ horror and hunger was perpetuated in the memory of the living former prisoners, who were young children at the time.

Undoubtedly, the memoirs of former inmates of the Łambinowice labour camp prove that the experience of ‘concretizing death’ contributed to their ‘imprisonment in circumstances,’ preventing wider reflection.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the media coverage of the trial of the former camp commandant Czesław Gęborski undoubtedly promoted – after almost 60 years – a manner of understanding and talking about those events, with the colloquial emergent parallel narratives often already building on the canonized mythical story. Thus, the community of memory acquired a symbolic dimension.⁴¹

Therefore, can the recorded testimonies of former prisoners constitute a source of knowledge about the events unfolding in the Łambinowice labour camp? Certainly not in the legal sense, for the truth of the court is not the truth of the community recounting their own tragic experiences. Establishing facts to serve as procedural evidence, in courtroom conversations with witnesses more than 60 years after the reminisced events, constitutes a methodological error:

39 E. Nowak, *Obozy na Śląsku Opolskim w systemie powojennych obozów w Polsce (1945–1950). Historia i implikacje*, Opole 2002, p. 227.

40 A. Rokuszewska-Pawełek, *Chaos i przymus. Trajektorie wojenne Polaków – analiza biograficzna*, Łódź 2002, pp. 149–150.

41 One should recall here the reflections of Ralph Samuel and Paul Thompson, respected oral historians, who stated that “stories concerning hard times become stories of courage and perseverance [...]. Many events, perhaps even most, are true. However, the omissions of some and the manner of narration make these stories myths too,” R. Samuel, P. Thompson, *The Myths We Live By*, London 1990, pp. 7–8, qtd in L. Taylor, *Historia mówiona a badania nad dziejami ubioru*, ‘Kultura i Społeczeństwo,’ vol. 3–4, 2001, p. 162.

after so many years, former prisoners had become the bearers of communal memory in which the original raw accounts can no longer be distinguished. Former prisoners cannot become witnesses in their own cause, chiefly because the memory cultivated in the narratives (unofficial for years) has led to the formation of a communal idea of their own experiences in the camp and establishment of a strong sense of their own identity, in contrast to the official (institutional, propaganda) interpretations of modern history. Alicja Rokuszevska-Pawełek also noted this problem, claiming that “unofficial, alternative interpretations [of the past] may mean breaking out of state control, which leads to the construction of new identities.”⁴²

On the other hand, however, the presented narratives constitute a significant source of knowledge about the Łambinowice/Lamsdorf camp, documenting the cultural context within which a community, integrated by common memories that for years shaped its view of the past, functioned and continues to function. The shared memories remain highly emotionally charged, as confirmed by research on folklore materials classified as the so-called non-fairy tale prose, which described the functioning of local knowledge about the past. Characters from the past, present in colloquial narrative circulation, primarily acquire a symbolic dimension: they concretize values and cognitive patterns important for the group, they assist the bearers of a given tradition in ‘assessing’ whether a given behaviour should be seen as praiseworthy or contemptible, and they determine the group’s world picture.⁴³ Thus, the narratives of the former (then minor) inmates of the camp in Łambinowice enable us, above all, to decipher meanings and senses encoded in the communal memory, shaped over the years in conscious social isolation, away from others.

The abovementioned phenomenon of the ‘revitalization of memory’, i.e. incorporating events that had functioned in secret until then into official memory, manifestly relates to the political transformation that Poland underwent after 1989, which triggered, especially in Silesia, a new ‘requirement’ for political

42 A. Rokuszevska-Pawełek, *op. cit.*, p. 115. Relevantly, Paul Ricoeur (*Memory, History, Forgetting*, transl. J. Marganski, Kraków 2006) recognized that “the change from the status of oral to archival testimony constitutes the first historical transformation of living memory” (p. 223), and compared the roles of historian and judge related to their use of testimonies and documents in trial or during archival research, stating that, “the situation of the trial displays *de vivo* [live] court sources common to the historian and the judge” (p. 427); however, their analyses suffer from significant limitations. Ricoeur also recalls the words of Luigi Ferajjole: “The trial is, so to speak, the only case of a ‘historiographical experiment’ - the sources are used *in vivo*, not only because they are heard directly, but also because they are forced to confront each other, subjected to cross-examination, but also because they are encouraged, as in a psychodrama, to reproduce the case being judged” (pp. 425-426).

43 Cf. J. Hajduk-Nijakowska, *Wstęp*, in *Nie wszystko bajka. Polskie ludowe podania historyczne*, Warszawa 1986.

myths that would expose the Silesian sense of historical injustice.⁴⁴ Also affected was the functioning of the communal memory of the Łambinowice camp inmates, all the more so because the accused former commandant Czesław Gęborski, put on trial in the 'new Poland' for the crime of genocide committed 60 years ago, died before his sentence could be pronounced; in the meanwhile, many living witnesses to those events also passed away. The lack of legal resolution undoubtedly added to the sense of marginalization of the Silesians. The post-war incarceration of the native Silesian population in the camps (even the grounds of Auschwitz-Birkenau camp were used for that end) "was and is conceived in the context of a particular attitude towards the Upper Silesians, a political attitude that is categorically unjust. It makes evident the intimidation of the native population, its particular repression."⁴⁵

This is where, in my opinion, anthropology meets folklore studies: according to the latter, an individual utterance is always determined by its broadly perceived cultural context, especially any circulating reminiscence stories (spoken histories), which not only encapsulate the group's knowledge on a given topic but also arise through a creative fusion of the narrator's imagination and tradition. I believe that the use of folkloristic methods of testimony analysis results in a profounder understanding of the content, meaning and structure of reminiscence narratives operating in Silesian families, also taking into account the specific cultural context of intergenerational transmission. In this process, as Eva Hoffman stated: "survivors bring into the space of the family or circle of relatives not 'memories' but rather 'emanations' in 'a chaos of emotions,'"⁴⁶ citing her own reflection as proof: "In my home, as in so many others, the past broke through in the sounds of nightmares, the idiom of sighs and illness, of tears and the acute aches that were the legacy of the damp attic and of the conditions my parents endured during their hiding."⁴⁷ The sheer emotional charge of this reflection by necessity comes to the fore.

The analysis of memories of contemporary families 'working though' the traumatic experiences of their parents and grandparents benefits from employing the notion of post-memory, introduced by Marianne Hirsch. Post-memory as a concept undoubtedly facilitates the analysis of relationships between children, parents and grandparents in cases which the narrative images provided by older generations appear vivid and durable enough to shape the younger generation's emotions and modes of understanding and experiencing past events, determining the identity of

44 Cf. G.M. Gerlich, *op. cit.*

45 *Ibidem*, p. 161.

46 E. Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge. Memory, History and the Legacy of Holocaust*, New York 2004, pp. 9-10, qtd in: M. Hirsch, *Pokolenie postpamięci*, transl. M. Borowski, M. Sugiera, 'Didaskalia. Gazeta Teatralna,' vol. 105, no. 18, 2011, p. 30.

47 *Ibidem*.

the family and local community. "Family life, even in its most intimate moments, is not free from the influence of collective memory, shaped by public, generational structures of imagination and projection and the shared archive of stories and images that give shape to the transmission of individual and family memories."⁴⁸

The oral history method, i.e. the recording of narrated (spontaneous, spoken) history, is used nowadays by many humanities disciplines during field research to obtain oral testimonies. The analysis and interpretation of the recorded testimonies, especially those that highlight the cultural context in which the narrative occurred (through a narrative interview), even if employed for different purposes, decidedly present the humanities as a multifaceted subject with an anthropological dimension. The theoretical tenets guiding field research in the folklore studies, underscoring the folkloric situation in which the recording of narratives takes place, contribute significantly, in my opinion, to the methodology of oral history, deepening our understanding of biographical narratives, enriching both their anthropological and historical interpretations.

48 M. Hirsch, *Pokolenie postpamięci*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.



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**Summary**

Folklore studies of 'oral histories', functioning in common usage, value narrative 'oral sources' (direct messages), as they enable qualitative analysis of narrative interviewing, which is used by various scientific disciplines. The experience of folklorists also make it possible, in a significant way, to enrich the interpretation of the process of the creation and functioning of cultural communities, and above all to perceive the reasons for their qualitative differentiation, resulting from the contemporary context of reporting of knowledge about past events.