

Stories of Lives, Lives of Stories

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Walter Benjamin reminds us that „history is made up of fragments and absences. What is left out is as significant as what is included“. According to Grant McCracken, life stories are accounts given by an individual about his/her life; they become life stories when they are validated by other sources.¹ Hence, other than in personal documents, the object is the individual whose history we reconstruct. While autobiographies, memoirs, or diaries are written for various purposes, life histories are collected for the specific purpose of qualitative research.² In tune with this approach, this workshop problematized the visibility of different actors in history and suggested alternative ways of history writing by advocating more inclusive historiography that gives „voice to the voiceless“.

From famous figures' obscured global moments to common people's memory, the workshop focused on the hidden, the untold, and the forgotten. The questions of agency, subjectivity, and the historian's authority over it becomes entangled with methodological and ethical challenges. These considerations ultimately result in a multi-layered interaction of the researcher and its subject(s) to co-construct the narrative. As the title of this workshop suggests, that there are different individual and collective life-stories, while at the same time, there are multiple lives and afterlives of these stories. They are born and reproduced through mediation, repetition, censorship, and selection, and they are shared through networks and shaped through intersubjectivity. They can survive in the form of letters, memoirs, biographies, in the oral tradition and the individual and collective memory. In other words, the historian is as much part of the life story as the narrator whose life is told. On this note, the workshop discussed how and why do historians construct and deconstruct life-stories. What is the contribution

of ego-documents to historiography and what makes them special? Is this kind of history more empowering and socially engaged and why?

Barbara Myerhoff wrote that „one of the most persistent but elusive ways that people make sense of themselves is to show themselves to themselves, through multiple forms.“³ This workshop introduced a variety of life stories research approaches by focusing on the sources for writing life stories, such as archival sources, memoirs, letters, but also life story interviews. Particular focus was given to the kind of sources available to historians and the methodological and theoretical approaches for its interpretation.

LUISA PASSERINI (Florence/Turin), who presented her newly published e-book „Conversations on Visual Memory“⁴, delivered the keynote speech and discussed forms, which silence takes in oral stories. The main topic that ran through the talk was the effort to interpret some of the meanings of silence in oral memory and, more generally, in the history of subjectivity. She told that in 1978 the first oral history conference took place in Essex where she presented her work on the memory of fascism, which brought on the surface the continuous negotiations and the co-existence of resistance and submission. During interviews with working-class narrators in Turin she came across two types of silence: the silence of the politicised, who skipped the fascist period 1922–1943 in their narratives, but also a more complex silence made from trivial acts of resistance like jokes. This led her to the conclusion that in oral history, everything matters and nothing is irrelevant, so the researcher must adopt an open approach. There is no memory without silence and vice versa. It equally matters what is told and what is not, given that absolute silence is very rare. For Passerini, silence is a better term than oblivion, because

¹ Grant McCracken, *The Long Interview*, Newbury Park, CA, 1988, S. 19.

² Donatella Della Porta (ed.), *Methodological Practices in Social Movement Research*, Oxford, 2014, S. 262.

³ Barbara Myerhoff, *Remembered Lives. The Work of Ritual, Storytelling, and Growing Older*, Ann Arbor, MI, 1992, S. 257.

⁴ Luisa Passerini, *Conversations on Visual Memory*, Florence, 2018; open access: <http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/60164>.

the former happens in the context of the interactive relationship and it does not mean that the memory has disappeared, but that it is not revealed to the interviewer.

She then linked her experiences with her recent research on migration, which constitutes an opening to the connection between silence and memory through the interpretation of visual narratives. The BABE project (2013–2018) consisted of interviewing mobile people and asking for documentation of their itineraries of mobility. Some of the issues raised were the creation of maps brought in life during the interaction and not conceived as already formed or fixed mental maps or a white sheet of paper as visual silence. The initial flat interpretation of the white sheet as an act of refusal or blank, void, emptiness as criticism of their approach gave its place to the opportunity of dialogue towards a plural intersubjectivity, which is expressed not only through personal creation (drawing) but also through others' work (photography). As the narrator explained the drawing was not faithful enough to her memory, and she wanted to find photos, a type of visual memory which was not her own. One of the main aims of the project was to establish a dialogue between artists' creations on migration and the mobile people's visual testimonies. Examples of artistic creation were the „Postcards from Europe“ by Eva Leittolf depicting the „emptiness of heart“ in contemporary Europe and Ai Weiwei's artistic interventions in Palazzo Strozzi in Florence and elsewhere, representing different strategies of expression and mobilisation, like the strategy of modesty and the strategy of provocation respectively. The photos of Víctor López González under the title „Smuggling“ were interpreted as a sign that also images and stories are smuggled, clandestine, illegal, while the work of Bouchra Khalili „Foreign Office“ was viewed as a reminder of the afterlife of stories and their transmission through generations. These works of art all talk about memories of memories, stories of stories. The conclusion Passerini reached is that the scholars' challenge is to combine oral, written, visual and corporeal expression because a visual memory of Europe is under construction and we were called to contribute to it.

The first day of the workshop focused on

what could be considered as „trivial“ elements of daily life like childhood readings, summer visits to the home country and internment friendships, which, however, had a great impact on the formation of identities and the decision-making of the individuals. Another important common denominator of the presentations was the importance of networks in the evolution and the life-choices of the narrators, as well as dealing with the issue of intersubjectivity and the interpersonal relationship created during an interview. Emotions and expectations play an important role in the otherwise scholarly practice of qualitative research.

MARIA ADAMOPOULOU (Florence) examined the different functions of return visits as they are negotiated in the oral accounts of migrants, but also the Greek press and audiovisual releases focusing mainly in the period between the late sixties and the early eighties. She argued that the return visits were viewed as an opportune moment to refresh bonds with the sending country through reconnection with family, friends and the wider community. To maintain this argument, she mainly used the notion of transnationalism, which refers to immigrants' long-term attachment to their country of origin, as shown by participation in homeland politics, frequent returns home, and consumption of cultural products from the homeland, the maintenance of transnational family structures, remittances or border-crossing entrepreneurial activity.

During 2009 and 2011, DIETER REINISCH (Vienna) interviewed 25 former Irish Republican women activists.⁵ The main inquiries explored in his paper were, how Catholic convictions are projected on the interviewer by narrators in oral history projects on the Northern Ireland conflict, and secondly, what roles and functions these religious projects serve during the interview process. The Northern Irish Troubles are often described as a religious conflict, a description rejected by Irish Republican actors of the conflict. It has been argued that emotions, feelings, and subjective experiences carry many roles and functions and, thus, shape our research interests and decisions. Similarly, the appearance of the inter-

⁵ Dieter Reinsch, *Die Frauen der IRA. Cumann na mBan und der Nordirlandkonflikt, 1968–1986*, Wien, 2017.

viewer as much as the narrator's perception shape the story the narrators tell us in the interviews. Based on these considerations, he discussed how Irish Republican women projected their own Catholic convictions on the interviewer, despite stressing that they are not overly religious or practising their Catholic belief.⁶

CATALINA ANDRICIOAEI (Florence) drew on an interview she conducted in 2017 with Diamanta, a Romanian Roma woman living in Nottingham, UK. Her presentation aimed to shed light on the question of the audience(s), both present and expected, in oral history interviews. Her case study is the story of the golden necklace and Diamanta's body language. In shedding light on the subtleties of an interview, which enclosed three stories for three separate audiences, she argued that expectations of the audience(s), which include the interviewer herself, not only shaped the exchange of stories but also illuminated the position of the interviewer in the economy of the interview.

The second day explored the potential of written sources to illuminate hidden or obscured faces of individual life-stories. Furthermore, challenges that sensitive issues may bring up were discussed. TURKAY GASIMOVA (Florence) aimed to understand how life in Europe could be for a young Muslim coming from the far southern periphery of the Russian Empire to study in Brussels at the end of the nineteenth century. In comparison with his father Mirza Fatali Akhundov who is considered one of the well-known intellectuals of his time in the Russian Empire, the story of Rashid Bey Akhundov is known only to few historians. After graduating from Tiflis Classic Gymnasium, Rashid Bey continued his studies at the University of Brussels studying engineering during 1874–1882. The letters Rashid sent home to his family in Tiflis revealed a lot about his life in Brussels and the challenges that he had encountered. Altogether Rashid sent 53 letters from Brussel to his father and at least six letters to his mother and sister. Most importantly these letters provide extensive knowledge on the first European experience by a young Muslim who was intermediary through whom Akhundov tried to see the real Europe. Rashid's extensi-

ve responses to his father's curious questions and his observations about European society reveal the nature of the relationship between him and his father, his depressive personality and the deep sense of helplessness that eventually made him take his own life.

VICTORIA WITKOWSKI (Florence) presented her research of Rodolfo Graziani, a military figure from the Fascist period. He became a household name in Mussolini's Italy due to his leading role in the state's colonial wars in Africa and in the Second World War, where he led offensives on the North African front against the British, and back in Italy against the partisans. More recently, Graziani been back in the spotlight due to the erection of a publicly funded monument in his honour in 2012. A controversial man during his lifetime, the recent commemoration has sparked fierce reactions from foreign onlookers and some sects of Italian politics and society. His memory thus remains a fervent and multifaceted one and signifies heavy tension in current attitudes to Italy's recent past. While he is not the only example of the nation's divided memory, few other figures have generated so much discord like remembrance in the public sphere as Graziani has. During her PhD, she has therefore traced the public representation, myth-making, and remembrance of Graziani in Italy and abroad to fully account for such a phenomenon.

GABRIELLA ROMANO (London) focused on LGBT oral history projects, and over the years, she had to deal with silence(s) on several occasions. She illustrated the issue of silence(s) by giving examples based on her previous written and audio-visual work like the documentaries *L'altro ieri* (2002) and *Ricordare* (2004). From pain to self-censorship, from peer pressure to fear of being misunderstood, silence, though frustrating, was always a highly significant answer in itself.⁷

⁶Dieter Reinisch, Oral History and the Troubles. The Importance of Trust and the Role of the Interviewer, in: Writing The Troubles, <https://writingthetroublesweb.wordpress.com/2019/01/21/trust-and-the-role-of-the-interviewer/> (03.03.2019), and Dieter Reinisch, Oral History in Post-Conflict Societies. Experiences from Researching the Northern Ireland Troubles, in: Bridging, <https://ifph.hypotheses.org/2741> (03.03.2019).

⁷Gabriella Romano, The Pathologisation of Homo-

The two-day workshop provided an interesting platform for PhD researchers and early career scholars in the field of life history approaches working in Italy, Austria, and the UK. The interdisciplinary approach combining history and social science; together with memory studies, oral history, biographical research, and social movement studies stressed the need for theoretical and methodological grounded research combined with interdisciplinary openness. The wide range of papers from early career researchers who are all in one way or another influenced by the work of Luisa Passerini provide a useful window in which direction the field of life story research might develop in the coming decade. The organisers of the workshop are preparing a serious of EUI-HEC working papers as one additional output of these two debates – considering the theoretical and methodological originality and richness of the presented papers; these will make for intriguing reading.

Conference Overview:

Morning Session

Chair: Dieter Reinisch (University of Vienna/Webster University)

Maria Adamopoulou (EUI): Migrants' eternal returns: return visits from West Germany to Greece and family strategies

Adrian-George Matus (EUI): „A fatherless generation“? Roots of 1968ers

Uladzimir Valodzin (EUI): A well-forgotten story: Aleksandr Udodov and his un-usable past

Afternoon Session

Chair: Maria Adamopoulou (EUI)

Dieter Reinisch (University of Vienna/Webster University): Life stories and oral history in post-conflict societies: On trust and the role of the interviewer

Catalina Andricioaei (EUI): Parallel interviews: the spoken and the gestured

Keynote lecture by Luisa Passerini (EUI/University of Torino): „Dialogues and Silences in Oral and Visual Stories.“

Morning Session

Chair: Lucy Riall (EUI)

Turkay Gasimova (EUI): De-constructing the life of a young Muslim Russian subject in Europe through personal letters

Aleksandra Tobiasz (EUI): Gombrowicz's Diary - between the literary and ego-documental perspective

Victoria Witkowski (EUI): Between Myth & Reality: Tracing the Cultural Representation of the Fascist Empire through the Life and After-life of Rodolfo Graziani

Afternoon Session

Chair: Laura Downs (EUI)

Svetlana Poleschuk (EUI): Academic Careers in a Rapidly Changing World: Biographies of Academics Who Stayed or Left Belarus After the Year 1991

Gabriella Romano (Birkbeck, University of London): Dealing with silence/s

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sexuality in Fascist Italy. The Case of 'G', London, 2019; open access: <https://www.palgrave.com/in/book/9783030009939>.