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Oral History as Participatory Historiography

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Abstract: The article focuses on examining the participatory dimensions of oral history, its multidisciplinary nature, and the contexts in which it operates due to its participatory aspect. The article consists of two parts. The first part aims to introduce oral history as a method that assumes the possibility of participation in its use, highlighting subjectivity and the importance of collaboration in this approach. The second part analyzes discursive contexts (including applied history, public history, contemporary museology, rescue history, and preventive humanities) that can be realized through oral history thanks to its participatory dimension. The study utilized literature on oral history and participatory history.

Keywords: oral history, participatory history, rescue history, preventive humanities.

The purpose of this article is an analysis of aspects of participation in oral history and, in this context, the question of multidisciplinarity and operationalisation of oral history as a research in progress. I am also going to discuss the fields of research where oral history is particularly present due to participation. Those fields are, namely, unconventional history, applied history, public history, contemporary museology, rescue history or preventive humanities. I will start with a reference to Chapter 31 of *Wprowadzenie do metodologii historii*, dedicated to the public history. It states that:

> Oral history is a participatory historiography, in many cases emancipative and generally available. There are two definitions of it—both as a research method and as a way of understanding history where its social function is being emphasised. Oral history is a participatory practice because it can be pursued in the form of exclusively documentative projects (within, e.g., social archival science—see Example 2, p. 498). People of all ages can commit to those projects after a relatively easy and short training/self-training. The availability of oral history is quite high due to the fact that we live in

> times when documentative projects do not require big capital outlay and neither does their publication. . . . Workers of regional museums, libraries and community centres, different associate members from family roots seekers to narrow-gauge railway enthusiasts, more or less organised ethnic denominational and serial minorities as well as historians-amateurs—all of them acquired new inspirations and tools in order to do research and to be able to tell their past thanks to oral history.[1]

The participatory value of oral history is indicated here in the very be-ginning, but dealt with perfunctoriness. Bare affirmative stating that there is a wide access to practising such approach in history does not exhaust the issue, which might turn out to be interesting as regards the research methodology of history and oral history as an academic subdiscipline.

Dimensions of Participatory Oral History

Oral history has been developing since the 1960s, with one of the main drivers of its emergence being the transformation of Western historiography, which aimed to challenge the dominance of political history. During this period, everyday history and microhistory also began to flourish. In general terms, "oral history" refers to any information about the past as delivered by witnesses. In historical research, this type of transmission is referred to as oral tradition, recognised as one of the oldest forms of preserving and transmitting knowledge within human societies; hence, it is treated as a primary source. The modern concept of oral history, developed in the first half of the 20th century, is understood more narrowly as a method of eliciting sources through recording and transcribing witnesses' accounts, while more broadly it is considered a witness-centred history. It is generally defined as the collection, storage, and examination of historical information about individuals, social groups, significant events, or everyday life in particular time and place, using phonographic techniques and transcription of recorded interviews with witnesses. These memories and insights can thus be preserved, documented, and made available to benefit future generations and serve as a generated source for scholarly work. Equally important, oral history seeks to gather information from diverse perspectives and capture elements of communication that may not be found in written sources. In this context, it also refers to a specific type of data that is recorded, transcribed, and stored in archives, libraries, and institutions in the public domain, where interviews with historical witnesses, their archiving, and accessibility

[1] M. Kurkowska-Budzan, J. Wojdon, "Metodologia jako problem dla historii publicznej," in: *Wprowadzenie do metodologii historii*, ed. E. Domańska, J. Pomorski, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2023, p. 494.

constitute a statutory part of their activities. The distinct nature of this data is the knowledge it presents, which includes the subjective dimension of the witness's account, encompassing thoughts, opinions, emotions, meaningful silences, and, most importantly, the individual understanding and meaning attributed to past events.

Oral History as a Collaborative Discourse

The roots of oral history practice can be traced back to the 19th century, when American anthropologists began recording Native American stories using phonographic cylinders. The first organised initiative in this field was the Federal Writers' Project, where trained interviewers collected testimonies from across the United States, including the accounts from witnesses of the Civil War and the American system of slavery.[2] Simultaneously, the Library of Congress in Washington began preserving traditional music and sounds of American folklore on phonograph records. After World War II, the introduction of tape and wire recorders allowed for longer recording times, marking a point when historians began to engage more actively. For example, in 1946, psychologist David P. Boder from the Illinois Institute of Technology travelled to Europe to record extensive interviews with Holocaust survivors.[3] Two years later, historian Allan Nevins at Columbia University founded the first dedicated research institution, the Columbia Oral History Research Office (now known as the Columbia Center for Oral History Research), with a programme for systematically recording, transcribing, and archiving interviews with historical witnesses. In 1954, the University of California, Berkeley, established its Regional Oral History Office. American historians went on to establish the Oral History Association in 1967; its European counterpart, the British Oral History Society, was founded in 1969. It could be said that the widespread availability of tape recorders in the late 1960s led to a wave of recorded oral documentation on social movements and protests of the era, which in turn heightened scholarly interest in this form of historical source material.

Today, the institutionalisation of oral history has a global and multi--level reach, spanning state, local, and non-governmental structures; since 1996, the International Oral History Association (IOHA) has also been active. These institutions share a common organisational structure: they operate

[2] *American Life Histories*: *Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940*, Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/collections/federal-writers-project/about-this-collection [accessed:09.09.2024].

[3] See C. Marziali, *Mr. Boder Vanishes*, "This American Life," 2001. www.thisamericanlife.org/197/before-it-had-a-name/act-one-7 [accessed: 09.09.2024].

in the public domain, organise workshops, conferences, and seminars, and publish bulletins and journals focused on project reports and methodological and theoretical issues in oral history research. Specialised collections and archives with open access are also being established online.

It can be argued that oral history has become, to some extent, an international movement within multidisciplinary historical research, significantly supported by the development of new information and communication technologies (ICT). These technologies expand the reach of oral history through contemporary data processing techniques, enabling new forms of dissemination, virtually unlimited publication potential on the internet, and open access for researchers, educators, and other users who, with some training, can co-create its content.[4] This has led to a uniquely open approach among professional historians, who, while adhering to procedural frameworks developed over time, are increasingly open in their collection, analysis, and dissemination of oral history. This openness stems from the participatory nature of its methodology at every stage of its execution.

In the light of the above, it is worth considering the most prominent area of historical discourse: history in the public sphere, where the participatory dimension of oral history is now becoming distinctly visible. Oral history, by its very nature, is a dialogue between two equals—a researcher and a witness—who engage in a conversation without pressuring each other to express anything that contradicts their personal perspective or memories of the matter at hand. Neither participant can entirely predict the direction the conversation will take or the conclusions it might reach, as there is no predefined script. Both parties are thus part of an unpredictable experience, aware that they are engaging in an event guided only by a shared purpose—to impart and receive remembered history as a mutual heritage. The participants also recognise that oral history embraces a unique polyphony regarding a particular event or period in history. This includes diverse ways of understanding and interpreting it, as well as individual emotions felt during the encounter.

Levels of Participation in Oral History

Participation in oral history manifests on multiple levels. This is due, in part, to the need for prolonged and systematic collaboration among many people, including the time and commitment of both the witness and the researcher who records, transcribes, and collects the account. Following the collection, teams are involved in transcribing, archiving, improving the technical quality

[4] See D.A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, Oxford University Press, New York 2003, pp. 246n.

of audio and video recordings, and making them available to a broad audience. There is also a deeper (intellectual and emotional) engagement when researchers work with the final, accessible material in public spaces like museums.[5] We can distinguish several dimensions of participation in oral history:

- Witnesses as Participants: Interviews are conducted with individuals who took part in the events being recounted. Their remembered stories serve as a testament to this participation, preserved in audio or audiovisual form for future generations.
- Non-Academic Contributors: Oral history practice often involves non-academic participants (usually after some training), such as history enthusiasts and those close to the witnesses. This dimension of participation situates oral history within public history, engaging a wider community.
- Interdisciplinary Scholars: Researchers from diverse academic fields actively participate in public spaces, overseeing the preservation of methodological standards and the evolution of oral history techniques. This interdisciplinary collaboration has contributed to the development of new perspectives in the humanities, from exploring previously overlooked histories (such as women's history, working-class history, and indigenous history) to fostering approaches like "rescue history."
- Educational Programmes: Following the principle of amplifying marginalised voices, oral history projects are conducted in schools and universities, involving students under teacher supervision. This form of education fosters an appreciation for local history and community engagement, promoting self-directed activism within public history.[6]
- Biographical Approach: In oral history practice, researchers often share their own family histories to establish credibility with interviewees. This type of participation helps bridge potential fears or mistrust from the witness, enhancing the openness and trustworthiness of the exchange.
- Memory as Shared Experience: The complex interplay of the witness's and the researcher's individual and collective memories is another distinctive dimension of participation in oral history. This collaboration unfolds in the course of conversation, representing an

[5] Cf. M. Kopiniak, *Historia mówiona jako narzędzie partycypacji muzealnej*, "Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej," vol. 11, 2021, pp. 95 n.

[6] See I.T. Hill, *Community Stories: a Curriculum for High School Students*, "Magazine of History" no. 18(2), 2004, pp. 43-45.

integral part of oral history practice and a critical thread in memory studies.

- Archaeological Context: A unique participatory dimension emerges in archaeology, where researchers frequently conduct group interviews with local residents who can assist in identifying artefacts. By drawing on community memories associated with known objects, like those from ancestral households, this practice identifies a shared cultural identity among participants.[7]

The Multidisciplinarity of Oral History and Participation

Due to its public accessibility and the proximity of its methods to "ordinary people"—potential witnesses, non-professional contributors, and audience members—oral history has become a focal point in new humanities. Disciplines such as anthropology, historical sociology, media studies, information science, and cultural history value oral history for its multifaceted approach. Testimonies collected through oral history offer a rich discursive field for studying the social structure and cultural or religious characteristics of different groups, including ethnic and local traditions.[8] Legal studies also draw on oral history, especially when witness accounts are treated as evidence in judicial processes. Journalism has a vested interest in oral history, with numerous journalists now practicing it and witness testimonies frequently appearing in the media. Meanwhile, literary studies and ethnolinguistics examine orality as an essential aspect of oral history's potential in academic research. In this context, orality encompasses prosody, vocal expression, semantics, and visual elements like gestures and facial expressions, which contribute to conveying narratives and meaning.

The participatory dimension of orality also deserves emphasis. Spoken language, narrative sharing, and the dynamics of conversational discourse, which includes speech, expression, and gesture, are foundational to human civilisation. This participatory mode of communication facilitates the exchange of information through the evocation and transmission of stories, a fundamental characteristic of human communities.

Oral history has also applications in psychology and psychiatry, where discussing traumatic memories plays a therapeutic role, particularly in diagnosis. Observations from analysing accounts suggest a positive impact

[7] See P. Mullins, *The rhetoric of things: historical archaeology and oral history*, "Historical Archaeology" no. 48 (1), 2014, pp. 105-109.

[8] *Historia mówiona w świetle etnolingwistyki*, ed. S. Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska, S. Wasiuta, Wydawnictwo UMCS, Lublin 2008.

of discussing the past on elderly individuals, making oral history widely used in geriatrics. This approach provides a voice for those whose recollections strengthen mental alertness and overall well-being.[9] Finally, oral history is increasingly present in school education, where student involvement in projects naturally fosters an interest in family heritage and, consequently, history itself—as an engaging narrative and, potentially, as an academic field.

Operationalising Oral History as Action Research

Oral history's multidisciplinary nature demands frameworks that enable historians to utilise witness accounts rigorously, applying the historian's analytical methods to these elicited sources. To achieve reliable practice, each time sources are elicited, new operational frameworks (including research categories and contexts) are required. This need for tailored frameworks distinguishes oral history as a unique form of public history research. Alongside this, attempts to theorise oral history have led to the establishment of certain rules and research assumptions, allowing it to function as a recognised academic subdiscipline.

One key assumption is the approach to a witness's memory-based account as being both reflective and self-creative. This stems from the principles of interpreting remembered material, which is often selective, may contain factual inaccuracies, and may involve significant pauses. Historians also note a correlation between the memories of past events and the current experiences of witnesses. A witness's way of recounting memories is also shaped by the experience of the researcher and depends on whether the listener is hearing the account for the first time.

In oral history as action research, the rule is to integrate practical elements with an analytical and theoretical approach, where the former should inform the latter. The linking point between these elements is the analysis stage, which examines factors such as the tone of the witness's voice, the pace of their narrative, and their vocal emphasis or inflection. For video recordings, gestures and facial expressions are also examined. This helps reveal the speaker's attitudes and perspectives on the events they describe and supports assessing the reliability of the account.

Oral history's empirical nature is not limited to the experience of action research; it also encapsulates the concept of "witness history"—someone directly involved in events who, through remembered history, allows

[9] See www.teatrnn.pl/leksykon/artykuly/historia-mowiona-metoda-badawcza/ [accessed:09.09.2024].

the researcher to indirectly experience that memory. This is one of the most compelling dimensions of oral history, but it also poses risks for the historian's practice. Witnesses' emotionally charged expressions might mask intentions to withhold certain facts, while the emotions evoked in the researcher can challenge impartiality when working with these sources. Here, the empirical assumption expresses another rule in oral history research: for historians, what a witness did and said "then" is more important than what they do and say "now." However, what is crucial to oral history is that it can be a tool for reconstructing the meanings of past events—the meanings witnesses attribute to them as a complement to historians' factual work. Methodologically, oral history focuses on the experiences of each individual, valuing their narrative precisely for its individuality and uniqueness, or subjectivity. Here emerges another rule: coherence. In a broad sense, this is a narrative strategy in interviews with witnesses, where both parties contribute a pattern and structure to the narrative to facilitate its future comprehension and to instil a sense of credibility.

Methodology of Oral History Interviews

Historians use interviews to elicit primary sources. In oral history methods, obtaining informed consent from interviewees is a paramount ethical standard, essential for publication and archiving. Researchers also use open-ended questions to avoid leading or suggesting answers they might find desirable. Some interviews take on a confessional nature, covering the witness's entire life as a micro-historical lens through which an entire era can be glimpsed. Others focus on specific events the interviewees have experienced, particularly common among veterans and survivors. The methodological proximity of oral history interviews to journalistic interviews is also emphasised. Both approaches aim to uncover facts and compile narratives about people, places, and events. These approaches may complement one another in practice: journalism benefits from the nuanced methodology of historical analysis, and oral history gains from the strategies developed within investigative reporting, such as counter-interviewing techniques.[10]In fact, interviews became foundational in oral history methodology at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, when researchers prioritised "bottom-up" history, opening its practice to the public by involving non-specialists—amateurs and history enthusiasts. Within academia, this shift was influenced by emerging fields of new social history, microhistory, everyday life history, and nascent memory

[10] See M. Feldstein, *Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History*, "Oral History Review" 31, no. 1, 2004, pp. 1-22.

studies, where the unique perspective of the witness, particularly from outside the elite, was valued. Since then, these areas of study (especially memory studies) have become integral to discussions among oral history theorists and methodologists.

This has led to a few regular considerations within oral history methodology. Most notably, there is the selective, self-creative, and confabulatory aspect of witness recollections and the factual inaccuracies (such as names, dates, and other quantitative data). To mitigate these issues, researchers conduct thorough preparatory research to form clarifying questions.

However, an enduring, though hard to justify, bias persists: oral history is often viewed as less reliable than written archival sources, which are still considered the foundation of historical research. However, oral sources offer an essential intangible value—an atmosphere of historical time (including the prevailing concepts, language, customs, and ways of life) that is often elusive in written archives. Thanks to this, oral history can effectively establish a broad contextual panorama and explore new theoretical issues, thus "reinforcing" the written record of the evoked source base.[11] Consequently, two aspects of oral history interview methodology stand out as particularly distinctive within historical research methodology.

Transcription

Transcription of data obtained is a standard practice in oral history, especially since it does not require hiring professional transcribers; its purpose is to make the witness's account more accessible. Transcriptions are also used in future research, which largely determines how they are produced. Often, however, specific features of the account (such as dialect, unnecessary repetitions, colloquial expressions, vulgarity, and linguistic errors) may be neutralised, or even omitted, meaning the transcription does not reflect the original, authentic statement. This remains a methodological issue, prompting an ongoing discussion within oral history theory.

Biographical and Event-Based Methods

The biographical method seeks to obtain an account of the witness's entire life history. Questionnaires and surveys may be used to organise data, helping the witness build a cohesive narrative structure, and sparing the researcher from frequent follow-up questions during the conversation. Additional questions in this method are generally reserved for after the witness's main narrative and typically address specific issues, topics of interest to the witness, and points omitted in the main account. A possible drawback

[11] E. Pfaff, *Oral History*, "Wilson Library Bulletin;" May, vol. 54, 1980, pp. 568-571.

is that leaving the witness free to speak may result in a somewhat chaotic narrative; however, this can also be an advantage—the biographical method encourages the complexity and reflectiveness of the witness's account, with participants generally prepared to assist in the process, often bringing visual materials and artefacts.

Event-based narratives, by contrast, have a narrower thematic focus, concentrating on one event or phenomenon from the past. Consequently, these accounts are shorter but more detailed. However, unlike the biographical method, there is a risk the witness may overlook certain related themes, deeming them irrelevant. The researcher can address this gap with direct questions, inviting the witness to recall other related memories, associations, feelings, and personal experiences, thereby incorporating elements of the biographical method.

Discursive Contexts

Oral history, as history of witnesses (rather than historians), aligns with the growing public desire to understand their family heritage, regional culture, or broader histories from outside the factual content typically presented in school textbooks. This position of oral history, and its concept itself, is worth considering within the contexts of its development across different research approaches.

Unconventional History

In her book *Unconventional Histories*, Ewa Domańska describes this as an "avant-garde strand and approach to the past within the new humanities."[12] She demonstrates that the evolution of this strand is influenced by various humanities disciplines outside history—anthropology, archaeology, cultural studies, literary studies, and art history—and by the development of new forms of historical narrative. Unconventional history entails, in the first step, addressing topics omitted in mainstream historiography, often due to the lack of primary sources or the perception by professional historians that certain issues are of limited interest or relevance (such as discriminated, marginalised, or no longer existing social groups). Domańska asserts that unconventional history can become an essential tool for uncovering knowledge about them.[13]Oral history shares characteristics with unconventional history; one of these is its shift towards the history of witnesses outside the historian's

[12] E. Domańska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne*, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2006, pp. 18-19.

[13] Ibid., p. 19.

domain. To some extent, the practice of eliciting sources through oral history is unconventional, as is the recounting of remembered histories, which fills gaps in archival materials and strengthens scholarly factual records with the witness's narrative. Initially, however, oral history was marginalised as unscientific and unreliable, as witnesses' accounts were judged as inherently biased, incomplete, and often self-creative, and therefore ahistorical. Over time, however, its usefulness in studying history has been recognized,[14] particularly when addressing elusive topics such as trauma and the experience of loss, a sense of injustice, or the experience of rituals.

It seems that the practice of remembering is a key element of the unconventional nature of oral history methodology. During interviews, this practice primarily involves eliciting witnesses' memories through conversation, often combined with viewing artifacts and visual materials that may assist in reconstructing events. However, oral history does not rely solely on the standard interview format. Another way of evoking memories is by walking through locations connected to the witness's experiences and their remembered history.[15]An additional, unconventional method of triggering memories and visualizing them in space is the creation of so-called memory maps. Using this method, a witness can sketch the area associated with the recalled events while narrating stories linked to specific locations. Naturally, these are not maps from a geographic perspective; cartographic accuracy is not their purpose. These drawings are meant to illustrate how the witness remembers their immediate surroundings and to facilitate recollection.[16]It is worth noting that unconventional history is not opposed to the discipline of history. It is not feasible to confine scholarly historiography to sources obtained solely through archival research, as unconventional methods often reveal previously unknown content. Similarly, unconventional history cannot exist without traditional factual history and its scholarly methodology, which provides a foundation—a "framework"—upon which new elements can be added. These areas interpenetrate, and the methodology or approach once considered unconventional in historical practice can evolve into a subdiscipline or an auxiliary science within academic history.

Applied History

Robert Traba, the author of the concept of applied history, defines it as "a method of educating future managers of historical programs and at

[14] Ibid.

[15] Spacery z Historią mówioną: www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJNzq0q5C9ms0-N1F4SesMzTx3kjP2xFK [accesed:09.09.2024].

[16] See www.teatrnn.pl/wystawy/o-mapach-pamieci/ [accesed: 09.09.2024].

the same time a discipline drawing on the practice of history in the public space."[17] Given that, as a method and (sub)discipline, applied history would particularly relate to regional history and memory studies (especially of local communities); he also suggests including research areas such as microhistory, the history of interactions, and the methodology of case studies within its framework. In this context, applying history would primarily involve combining and interpenetrating contemporary historical knowledge with the cultural environment and interacting with the local community, which uniquely perceives the presented content. This practical dimension of historical research would serve to shape imagination and deepen scientific skills (starting with extended archival research and interdisciplinary work with various source materials), moving towards comparative studies.

It is important to note that the inspiration for creating the model of applied history can be found in the American field of "public history," which engages large groups of people in the active practice of historical research and education, though initiated by the academic community. In contrast, the European variant follows an opposite trend: it emerges among history enthusiasts in the public sphere and gradually infiltrates academic discourse, facing resistance from scholars concerned about "scientifying history" within research institutions. In Poland, the pioneer of applied history practices is Professor Robert Traba, who implements this research model in action through borderland, neighborly relations, and Polish-German interactions.[18] Currently, applied history is practiced, to varying degrees, by institutions such as the KARTA Foundation, the Grodzka Gate—NN Theatre Center, and contemporary museums in their research and educational departments, which integrate historical knowledge with a mission of activity in the public sphere.

Regarding the key issue of the participatory nature of oral history, two elements of the applied history concept should be highlighted. First, for oral history, the significant aspect is the verb-derived adjective "applied," which means involving memory witnesses and the cultural landscape as the context of their stories, as well as the direct interaction of the interview participants. Second, regarding applied history, this adjective indicates its practical dimension, which essentially takes academic history into the public sphere as research in action, with the specific element being the incorporation of

[17] R. Traba, *Historia stosowana jako subdyscyplina akademicka. Konteksty i propozycje*, in: *Historia—dziś. Teoretyczne problemy wiedzy o przeszłości*, ed. E. Domańska, R. Stobiecki, T. Wiślicz, Universitas, Kraków 2014, pp. 158n.

[18] R. Traba, *Historia stosowana. Pamięć i krajobraz jako nośniki badań i edukacji historycznej*, [in:] *Purda Wielka 1900–2006. Portret wsi*, J. Pilecki, E. Traba, M. Kardach [eds.], Stowarzyszenie Wspólnota Kulturowa „Borussia", Olsztyn 2008, pp. 7-20.

memory discourse and remembered history (the history of witnesses) into historical narration. Thus, the theoretical framework of applied history includes categories of communicative and cultural memory and issues of memory in culture and the experience (lived experience) of history—important also in the conceptual framework of oral history.

At this point, I would like to emphasize that my understanding of applied history in relation to my own practices of oral history lies in attempting to reflect on research in action within contemporary humanities. Its meaning, therefore, involves expanding the perspective of historical research (beyond the history discipline), incorporating memory and the landscape into historical narratives (of various scales), and new forms of historical education using new media and digital technology. This leads to a specific understanding of oral history as history in the public sphere.

Public History

Oral history, considered as research in action and a participatory discourse, particularly realizes the assumptions of the public history concept. It is especially its placement in the areas of people's daily lives and the grassroots dimension of research-educational initiatives that programmatically strengthen the historical message through direct influence and participation in its creation and communication by social recipients. A key feature of public history is the focus on the communicability of content and open access to it; this is particularly important in the case of narrative museums and archival resources (in the modern form of social archiving).[19] Public history aims to engage the audience both intellectually, emotionally, and creatively, placing less emphasis on the quality and detail of the transmitted content than on its form and participatory dimension. This is most evident in museum spaces, which are in fact the oldest public history institutions, where the task has been and continues to be arranging exhibits that "tell" about the past in an attractive way to encourage frequent visits. However, the audience for these contents is no longer the appropriately prepared student of the "temple of Knowledge and Muses," but rather the so-called ordinary person of all ages. Hence, the indispensable presence of inclusive elements (e.g., technical and organizational adaptations for people with disabilities) and entertainment elements, based on interactivity using ICT technology.[20] However, critics of this model signal concerns about the "Disneyfication of history" in museums, understood as the prioritization of various narrative and technical

[19] J. Wojdon, *Public History, czyli historia w przestrzeni publicznej*. "Klio. Czasopismo Poświęcone Dziejom Polski i Powszechnym," vol. 34 (3)/2015, pp. 25-41.

[20] Ibid.

techniques that aim to increase its appeal to audiences, especially excessive simplification of the message and the emphasis on sensational or romantic threads.[21]One particularly exploited area of contemporary public history practices is the media—traditional (television and radio) and new media, particularly social media and the internet. They represent the contemporary public space, enabling not only the popularization of historical content but also its creation and transformation.[22] In this context, the media of the public space support the development of the spoken word, including its forms and techniques of preservation, such as audiovisual thematic channels, podcasts, websites, and entire online platforms that in practice create space for oral history. They also serve the goal of public history—co-creating knowledge in an open and often free (with the ability to edit content) access at any chosen time. It is important to note that public history is characterized by a particular focus on regional history and the memory of local communities. This space is the closest to people in daily life, allowing access to the message from the so-called great history, e.g., places related to its events, figures, or large-scale processes. It is also important for people in relation to the oral history of their ancestors, whose stories are deeply rooted in regional events, within the broader context of great history. Equally important are locally active historians who support smaller institutions, associations, and grassroots initiatives. They offer their scientific knowledge in collaborative projects with local communities. They are often also popularizers of historical knowledge, capable of translating the academic language into simple and accessible content. The mission of a public historian, the optimal way of which is oral history, is also to explore unpopular, omitted, or suppressed topics in order to make them socially accessible and to raise awareness. Consequently, it becomes possible to create a space for social participation in preserving and transmitting knowledge about them.[23]

Contemporary Museum Practice

A noticeable change that has occurred in museology over the last half-century, particularly in the context of the decline of the dominance of European political history in scientific research in favor of social history, microhistory, and cultural history, is the shift away from the dominance of national or state narratives, especially from the atmosphere of the "temple of knowledge," aimed at educated representatives of the Western elite. Contemporary museum narratives are now less about one-size-fits-all representations of

[21] Ibid., p. 12.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., pp. 31-35.

the state, rulers and the organization of colonial peripheries by imperial civilizations, and increasingly about research-educational projects preserving the remembered histories of local cultures and indigenous peoples, the daily life of regional inhabitants, and marginalized social groups, with the interactive audience potentially being a random local visitor. Museums, employing both academic historians and public historians, are opening up to a wider audience, offering popular-scientific historical education through performative elements in temporary and permanent exhibitions, occasional or cyclical panel discussions, workshops on museum practices, and popular mass events such as archaeological picnics or historical reenactments. This area of activities in the public museum space also includes the creation of archives and oral history archives, made available on the internet and used within exhibitions. Therefore, if the contemporary narrative museum, with interactive audiovisual storytelling as the relatively new element, is to be fundamentally "a living institution, acting for and with society," it must be oriented towards continuous and active communication with its audience, planning its exhibition strategy in all the social contexts in which it operates.[24] It thus also becomes a place for creating cultural memory (according to Jan Assmann's concept), and therefore certain interpretative schemes of history, also within the framework of historical policy and memory policy, serving not so much (or not only) the impartial knowledge of the past, but in some way the myth-creating formation of individual identities and social bonds.

This also changes the concept of the visitor, who is increasingly becoming an interactive participant and sometimes a co-creator rather than just a passive observer of objects enclosed in glass showcases. A participatory museum is understood as "a place where visitors can create content, share it, and connect/interact around it."[25] This strategy involves including visitors in various activities proposed by the museum, enabling the participatory museum to differentiate, change, and personalize content depending on the co-creators involved. People are thus encouraged to be active in the museum space as a social institution, a place for building individual and collective narratives around what is presented and made available.

These tendencies seem to create a natural ground for the participatory dimension of oral history in museums. The content conveyed by the "witnesses of history" and participants in museum activities can complement historical knowledge not only with new facts but also with everyday experiences and

[24] See K. Kuzko-Zwierz, *Historia mówiona w muzeach. Przegląd projektów prowadzonych przez polskie placówki muzealne,* "Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej," 5, 2015, pp. 91-109.

[25] M. Kopiniak, *Historia mówiona jako narzędzie partycypacji muzealnej*, "Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej," 11, 2021 pp. 91-94.

subjective opinions on various events and phenomena. Their inclusion in museum exhibitions allows for the construction of a polyphonic historical narrative, where even opposing viewpoints can be presented. Introducing individual experiences told in one's own voice, sometimes also through facial expressions and gestures captured in video recordings, adds significant emotional depth, making the exhibition more authentic and closer to ordinary life.

Creating relationships from the very stage of meetings with interviewees is also a form of communication and engagement in activities undertaken and proposed by regional museum institutions. Applying oral history in museums is not only a tool for gathering valuable content in the form of recordings but also a way of building community around the museum and its initiatives. Oral history projects can thus serve the local community by building social relationships based on the discovery, protection, and preservation of regional heritage and the maintenance of its individual and collective memory.

Rescue History

In general terms, rescue history means preserving what remains from the past and seeking areas of cooperation where such activities have not yet started. Ewa Domańska, the author of this concept, emphasizes that rescue history is directed towards saving what is endangered by oblivion.[26] While both memory and history aim to preserve and transmit knowledge, memory and history have a different logic, different recipients, and different processes. Memory is often a process of selective recollection that serves specific social purposes; history, on the other hand, is a professional research discipline. Memory, understood as an individual or collective act of recalling the past, is both the starting point and a kind of "resource" for constructing history, in contrast to history as research involving reflection and interpretation.

In the case of rescue history, the starting point is often not the traditional historical narrative but individual narratives, testimonies, and fragments of forgotten or marginalized histories. The field of rescue history serves as an attempt to save and record knowledge that might otherwise be lost. In this context, oral history as a tool becomes an essential means of preserving local histories and the experiences of individuals whose voices have not been adequately heard in academic or public discourse. The "rescue" in history can, therefore, be understood as the protection of memory, be it through interviews with witnesses of historical events, documentation of traditions and practices, or the safeguarding of artifacts that hold meaning within local communities.

[26] E. Domańska, *Historia ratownicza*, "Teksty Drugie," no. 5, 2014, pp. 12-26.

Preventive Humanities

A new perspective on oral and rescue history is placing them within the context of preventive humanities, a concept created by a group of young researchers called RAT (Resilience Academic Team), established in 2017. These researchers come from various academic institutions and represent diverse research approaches. They form a team aimed at sharing experiences and supporting each other in research work, led by Ewa Domańska. The concept itself is intended to be interdisciplinary, combining various disciplines that seemingly have nothing in common. RAT scholars defined it in line with the Latin meaning of the word "prevention" (praevenire—to anticipate, to prevent), meaning it is a discipline designed to foresee the occurrence of certain events (with a negative connotation), prepare for them, adapt, and implement protection against potential consequences.[27]At this point, the paths of preventive humanities intersect with rescue history. The "rescue" aspect in history involves collecting remnants of the past, preserving the last, deteriorating traces in a race against time, where success means saving evidence of the past. This is well illustrated by the efforts of oral history historians, focusing on interviews with witnesses of World War II. There are now very few individuals who personally remember these events; they are of advanced age and often in varying state of health. Conducting interviews with some of these witnesses proves impossible due to their condition or because the historian reaches them too late.

Preventive humanities address these challenges by aiming to safeguard testimonies of the past before they deteriorate or require rescue. This involves predicting what is most vulnerable to destruction, estimating when this might occur, and determining what actions need to be taken to prevent the destruction process from even beginning. Prevention in history aims to secure traces of the past in such a way that, when the natural process of decay begins, there will still be sufficient materials preserved to allow the reconstruction of what has succumbed to the passage of time. Often, preventive actions are not fully deliberate. Many organizations, institutions, or ordinary people engage in preventive activities on their own, often maintaining chronicles that document the most important events occurring during their operations.

In oral history, one example of preventive action would be reaching out to younger witnesses of history to propose interviews. These are individuals who, in several or a dozen years, will be as difficult to reach as the previously mentioned witnesses of World War II. The earlier an interview is conducted,

[27] Resilience Academic Team (RAT) Humanistyka Prewencyjna, Warszawa—Poznań 2022. p. 9.

while the witness is in better condition, the smoother the process can be. This does not mean that historians will only speak with younger individuals who remember events in detail. There will still be a need to "rescue" the past through interviews with the oldest witnesses. However, preventive humanities in the context of oral history aim to reduce the need for future rescue actions by ensuring earlier work is done. Preventive efforts are characterized by greater calm, precision, and planning, achievable by eliminating a key adverse factor—time.

Final Remarks

Oral history, as a form of participatory historiography, aligns with the movement of so-called engaged humanities. It is a field of research, education, and social activism whose broader aim seems to be to prove that society needs the humanities for the development of science that serves society. This includes particularly the development of its communicative language, stimulating new directions in philosophical and contextual reflection on the worldview (not only of humans) created by science, but also the creation of other ways of knowing the world beyond the natural and exact sciences—to understand how and why something exists and happens.[28]The methodology of oral history is employed by professional historians working with witness testimonies primarily as a source method (or, more generally, as a method of acquiring a particular type of primary source). On the other hand, in the public sphere, there are entities involved in collecting, processing, and disseminating witness histories. In this space, projects implementing oral history methodologies contain features and functions of participatory rescue history, which, through the involvement of historians, witnesses, and their institutional environment, gains particular cognitive, ethical, and, generally, cultural value.

This value is revealed in its presence in the public sphere, where the focus is not only on open access to knowledge resources using new ICT techniques or the participation of professional humanists in social movements, but also on the engagement of non-professional researchers in practicing it. In the academic space, such an orientation in the humanities is partly a response to the need for socially co-creating historical narratives beyond the academic discipline of history. From this perspective, it also serves to expand the author's still modest experience in practicing oral history with a theoretical foundation and greater knowledge in the field of its discursive development, particularly in relation to currents within the humanities (such as rescue history and memory studies), and more broadly—with regard to the study

[28] Cf. R. Nycz, *Nowa humanistyka w Polsce: kilka bardzo subiektywnych obserwacji, koniektur, refutacji*, "Teksty Drugie" 2017, no. 1, pp. 18-40.

of history, especially in terms of how it transforms and shapes the discourse within the humanities.

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