MESA 62

TABLE 62

Cuestionando la metodología de la historia oral. Parte 2
Questioning Oral History Methodology. Part 2

CHAIR
Douglas Boyd (US)

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Kate Moore (Finland):
“Time Is Not on Our Side: The Hidden Agenda of Chronology in Ellis Island Interviews”

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Alexander Freund (Canada):
“Why Oral History is Not Storytelling – and Why We Should Not Say It Is”

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Chantal Bisschop (Belgium):
“Self-reflection: academic world versus cultural heritage”

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John Barzman (France):
“What Happens to Oral History Interviews”

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Edmunds Supulis (Latvia):
“Approaching the “runaway memory”: Particularities in studying Roma oral histories”
Time Is Not on Our Side: The Hidden Agenda of Chronology in Ellis Island Interviews.

Kate Moore  
(Finland):

Abstract: This presentation will examine how adhering to chronology in interviews can create significant ruptures in narrations. By analyzing immigrant interviews conducted by the Ellis Island Oral History Project, I will demonstrate that when an interview structure presupposes that memory is linear, this assumption can disrupt and re-shape personal narratives. This analysis is based on the interviews of immigrants who had arrived at Ellis Island from 1900 to 1950.

While the Ellis Island immigrants occasionally departed from narrating chronologically, the interviewers generally discouraged this free flow of time and imposed linearity on the immigrants’ narrations. This meant that the interviewers sometimes interrupted the speakers’ stories, instructed them to wait for a more appropriate time to mention that particular information, or ignored some of their statements in an effort to return to the pre-determined interview questions. In short, the interviewers attempted to prevent the constant “shuttling back and forth in time,” which has been suggested by Portelli (1991) as being a natural aspect of storytelling.

Finally, it will be demonstrated that by dividing the interview into discrete time units and by imposing these life divisions on the narrator, the interviewer resembles a data miner who has implicitly pre-determined that certain themes are preferred. When these factors are combined with the interviewer’s identity as a representative of an official archive, the narratives can risk becoming collectively skewed. As it will be shown, the result can be a fainter voice of the narrator that is drowned out by the din of a hidden institutional agenda.
Self-reflection: academic world versus cultural heritage.

Chantal Bisschop
(Belgium):

Resumen: Muy a menudo, una brecha se identifica entre la práctica de proyectos de historia oral en el ámbito del patrimonio cultural y los conocimientos académicos relativos a la historia oral. Este documento de trabajo pretende desentrañar cómo los métodos académicos pueden ser adoptadas por los profesionales del patrimonio en proyectos de historia oral. En primer lugar una visión general se da de la situación pasada y presente de la historia oral en Flandes, tanto en el contexto académico y cultural del patrimonio. En segundo lugar, este trabajo ampliar sobre los conceptos de la intersubjetividad y la auto-reflexión con un enfoque en el método innovador utilizado en una investigación de doctorado sobre la transformación de la organización de agricultores. En la tercera parte, se demuestra cómo esta metodología puede ser traducida a los contextos reales de patrimonio cultural, mediante dos ejemplos concretos. En primer lugar, en el proyecto del patrimonio ‘Comprar scouts en el que los voluntarios están entrevistando comerciantes antiguos, el concepto de auto-reflexión fue introducido por una explicación teórica definitiva, diversas preguntas concretas y el método de un diario reflexivo. En segundo lugar, un manual de historia oral en la fabricación está haciendo hincapié en la necesidad de una descripción contextual de las fuentes orales. Se propone el método de transcripción elegido un archivo de transcripción que explica de forma crítica. Teniendo en cuenta la intersubjetividad de la historia oral se planea un nuevo archivo contextual. Este archivo contendrá información básica sobre el entrevistador, la relación con el narrador y el proyecto de entrevistas. Esta nota de estudio describe sólo el comienzo del proceso de traducción de los métodos de historia oral académicos en la práctica el patrimonio cultural. Sin embargo, todas estas medidas más bien simples están ayudando a introducir métodos académicos en proyectos de patrimonio y por lo tanto sin duda cambiar algo.

Abstract: Very often a gap is identified between the practice of oral history projects in the cultural heritage field and academic insights concerning oral history. This working paper seeks to unravel how academic methods can be adopted by heritage professionals in oral history projects. First an overview is given of the past and current situation of oral history in Flanders, both in academic and cultural heritage context. Second, this paper expand on the concepts of intersubjectivity and self-reflection with a focus on the innovative method used in a PhD research on the transformation of a farmers’ organization. In the third part, it is demonstrated how this methodology can be translated to actual cultural heritage contexts, using two specific examples. First, in the heritage project ‘shop scouts’ in which volunteers are interviewing old shopkeepers, the concept of self-reflection was introduced by a short theoretical explanation, various concrete questions and the method of a reflexive journal. Second, an oral history manual in the making is stressing the need for context description of oral sources. A transcription file that explains critically the chosen transcription method is proposed. Considering the intersubjectivity of oral history a new contextual file is planned. This file will contain some basic information on the interviewer, the relation with the narrator and the interview project. This working paper describes just the beginning of the process of translating academic oral history methods in cultural heritage practice. Nevertheless, all these rather simple measures are helping to introduce academic methods into heritage projects and thus certainly changing something.
Very often a gap is identified between the practice of oral history projects in the cultural heritage field and academic insights concerning oral history. However, these two worlds can learn a lot from each other and experts in both fields can benefit from a profound exchange of ideas. This working paper seeks to unravel how academic methods can be translated to and adopted by heritage professionals in oral history projects. More specifically, it is a descriptive paper of a work in progress with some preliminary thoughts and developing plans instead of definitive results or conclusions.

First, I will give an overview of the past and current situation of oral history in Flanders, both in academic and cultural heritage context. Second, I will expand on the innovative method used in my PhD research which focused on self-reflection. Third, I will demonstrate how this methodology can be adopted and translated in actual cultural heritage contexts, using two specific examples, namely the heritage project ‘shop scouts’ of the MAS, Museum of Antwerp and the developing of a new oral history manual for heritage workers.

THE ORAL HISTORY LANDSCAPE IN FLANDERS

Although oral history did not make its entry as early as in the USA or UK, Flanders, the Flemish speaking part of Belgium, has a rich oral history tradition. Since the 1980s the method gradually gained popularity in a diverse range of domains and disciplines such as journalism, media, cultural heritage industry, education and various academic disciplines.

In the first oral history wave of the 1970s and 1980s the universities and industrial archeologists took the lead.1 Two universities have been playing an important role in developing the scientific method of oral history. More specifically, the modern history department of the University of Ghent plays a significant role in the acceptance of oral history as a research method. In the first half of the 1980s professor Herman Balthazar and his students investigated different topics with oral sources. Professor Bruno De Wever continued this research tradition with oral history projects on topics such as ‘fascism and collective memory’.2

At the research unit ‘Modernity and Society’ (MOSA) of the modern history department of the University of Leuven professor Leen Van Molle is the pivotal figure. Since the 1980s she uses oral history as a research method and she published about the use of oral sources in historical research.3 Since 2003-2004 she teaches the innovative course ‘Oral history. Theory, methods and practices’ to Master students of Modern History. Several PhD students of professor Van Molle obtained a doctoral degree with thesis in which oral history plays a central role.4

On April 3 2009 MOSA organized a colloquium ‘Oral History. The interaction between objectives and methods’ that concentrated both on technical methods of recording interviews and questions about interpretation. Leen Van Molle and Jan Bleyen recently published the new academic book Wat is MondelingeGeschiedenis? (What is oral history?). The book, written in a very comprehensive language, addresses itself to students and researchers, but also to journalists, theater makers and heritage

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workers. But, this was not the first academic initiative that reaches beyond the university walls, on the contrary.

The so-called second oral history wave in Flanders came as a result of the increasing attention for cultural heritage. Universities and the cultural heritage industry found each other in a fruitful cooperation. The synergy between professor De Wever (University of Ghent) and the Flemish Centre for popular culture (VCV or Vlaams Centrum voor Volkscultuur - nowadays FARO, Flemish interface center for cultural heritage) was important. A first result was a very popular publication for the broad public. To respond to the need of more practical information, a website and a DVD box was developed. Another result was the project Van horenzeggen (By hearsay) about the conservation and opening up of oral sources in Flanders. Many conclusions of these final reports can still be applied to the contemporary situation. In 2012, a publication on oral history projects for secondary schools was made.

The cultural heritage field’s enthusiasm resulted in a large wave of oral history projects on miscellaneous subjects. Oral history was - and is - ‘hot’. The increase of oral history projects of the last 15-20 years went hand in hand with a large extent of professionalization. People became gradually more aware of the peculiarities of the oral history methodology. But, at the same time, oral history became a catch-all term in the discourse of all sort of cultural heritage players. The result is a certain dilution. Every interview with a certain historical bias that is more or less professionally framed, is nowadays called an exercise in oral history. In the last few years, the oral history ‘hausse’ seems to be cooled down a bit, but the need of reflection stays urgent.

In November 2011, CEGESOMA (Centre for Historical Research and Documentation on War and Contemporary Society) organized a colloquium on oral history in Belgium. The final report on this colloquium stated that oral history methodology perfectly matches with the current sensitivity for the preservation and the ‘rescue’ of heritage. However, a possible danger is the ‘overproduction’ of oral sources. Without a solid preservation policy this will lead to the reverse result: all these oral sources will disappear in the mass and become just ‘noise’. The final report stated there is a clear gap between the lack of academic recognition on the one hand and the explosion of bottom-up oral history projects on the other hand.

Since the colloquia of MOSA in 2009 and of SOMA in 2011, several initiatives have been set up to answer the need of revaluation of the academic oral history and the urge for a better support of oral history projects in different cultural heritage contexts. New publications such as What is oral history and the publication of recent PhD research are clearly showing that oral history is more than relevant in academic Flanders. Nico Wouters (CEGESOMA, University of Antwerp) and Koen Aerts (University of Ghent) are currently editing a theme number of the journal BTFG dedicated to “Oral history in Belgium: to a research model for collective memory and representation”. Together with twelve oral history researchers, including myself, they want to revalue academic oral history and to make a claim for scientific historical research.

10 De Witte, N. e.a. Leren van horen zeggen. Draaiboek voor een vakverschrijdend project mondelinge geschiedenis in het secundair onderwijs, Berchem (De Boeck) 2012.
12 Wouters, Mondelinge Geschiedenis in Belgie: 3-4, 73-74.
In the field of cultural heritage things are moving too. Nowadays oral history comes more and more in the picture within the framework of intangible cultural heritage. The UNESCO 2003 convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage caused, amongst other things, an increasing awareness of intangible cultural heritage in general and of oral traditions in particular. But, this goes hand in hand with an increasing confusion of concepts. People are often confused and think that UNESCO domain 1 of ‘Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage’ is simply the same as oral history. In September 2014, the one-day conference ‘In sound and image’ will tackle this confusion by focusing on the concepts intangible heritage, oral history and oral sources. Furthermore, in this conference people will learn how to use academic methods from different disciplines in the practice of heritage work to document intangible cultural heritage in a participative and audiovisual way. FARO, the Flemish interface center for cultural heritage, started last year a thinking tank about the future of oral history in the cultural heritage field. The purpose is to develop a longer trajectory about the methodology of oral history, with for example a new training course for professional heritage workers under the name of ‘train-the-trainer’.

This short overview clearly shows that things are moving in the field of oral history. However, academics don’t always appreciate the efforts of heritage workers trying to finish their projects as good and professional as possible with the scarce available time and resources. On the other side, the cultural heritage sector often looks with suspicion to the ‘big theoretical concepts’ from academic oral historians which are, according to them, impossible to apply to their own projects.

ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE: SELF-REFLECTION IN RURAL ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH

During my history studies at the University of Leuven, I continuously focused on oral history. In my PhD research on the transformation of an old farmers’ organization into a broad rural movement in Flanders (1950s-1990s) I used oral history interviews in an innovative way. In this research on the transformation of the Farmers’ Union and the adaptation of this old agricultural organization to a rapidly changing world, I focused on the interaction between structures and actors. I wanted to study not only how the organization had changed its structures and strategies, but also the role of the people behind these structures and how these actors have been giving meaning to these evolutions. The archival- and literature search was primarily suitable to reveal the evolving structures and dynamic of the organization. The oral sources shed light on the producing of meanings and perceptions of people of different levels. This combination of an institutional approach with a focus on meaning is usually not explicitly found in studies of agricultural organizations. I critically analyzed the interviews - and my own role in it - to the bone, which makes this methodology certainly innovative in rural history.

I preferred an open, informal and semi structured interview approach that stimulates creative, discursive and long answers. I choose the poetic transcription method developed by historian Jan Bleyen. This method is particularly suitable when the narrator tells his story in an open way, with an introduction to a ‘plot’ as it were, with successive thematic or chronological ‘scenes’. This poetic method benefits clearly a narrative analysis and investigation of meanings and metaphors. For the narrative analysis, which is not so much about the content of the story, but more about the telling itself, I used the performative analysis approach suggested by Catherine Kohler Riessman. Telling is seen as a performance in which the narrator

14 This conference is an initiative from E-Land (Heritage Cell Mechelen), www.immaterieelerfgoed.be, tapijs plein vzw and MAS and will take place on 16th September 2014 in Mechelen.
15 The first meeting took place on August 30, 2013. Currently this trajectory is temporary set on hold.
17Bleyen, Doodgeboren, 181. This method is not generally known by historians, but Bleyen based this method on sociological and anthropological research, in particular: Riessman, C.K. "Narrative analysis", in: M. Huberman and M. Miles eds., The Qualitative Researcher’s Companion, Thousand Oaks & Delhi [Sage] 202, 236-242.
convinces the listener with language and gestures. Narrators can perform their own identity during the act of telling. But also the interviewer is performing himself in a certain way.

Indeed, oral history is subjective, but also intersubjective. The interview is a product of communication between two individuals who each bring something of themselves in the interview process. So I had to be aware not only of the ways the narrators performed their own identity through telling their stories, but also of my own role. I selected the witnesses, asked some questions, gave certain responses, thus contributing to the form of the testimony. I have partly created the testimonies. To build actively an image of the past is not a matter of the narrator alone. Narrator and listener provide a shared authority, they are jointly responsible for the final result, stated Michael Frisch. The critical starting point to deal with this intersubjectivity is the historian’s consciousness of his own subjective position. That means we need to reflect on the input of the researcher and how his subjectivity has an impact on the stories that are told. “We should have an objective relation to our own subjectivity”, the anthropologist Victor Turner concludes.

Therefore, I continuously reflected on my own impact, position and role during my research. According to the situation, questions, context, narrator, moment, atmosphere etc., I played, just like other researchers, consciously and less consciously different roles which had an impact on the research process. These multiple researcher identities are nowadays often made explicit in ethnographic or anthropological research, but less in oral history research. Yet, it is important that also oral historians realize that the role of the interviewer cannot be detached from the own identity. On the contrary, depending on the circumstances, subject, the narrator etc. there are multiple identities playing.

Following sociologist Jennifer Mason, I was aware of the way my own attitude and roles depended each time on the specific social and contextual dynamics of each individual interview and on my own ‘repertoire’ of attitudes and social skills. It was always a matter of adapting myself a little bit to the personality and expectations of the interviewee. For example, I took a rather ‘ignorant’ role with a narrator who loved to display his knowledge and a more ‘supportive’ role when I met a reluctant witness. Moreover, I switched between my role as a stranger on the one hand and expressions of involvement on the other hand. I kept as a researcher of the University of Leuven – en not as an employee of member of the Farmers’ Union – the necessarily distance. Nevertheless, I also made clear that I was involved in the past they were telling.

Inspired by sociologists Sarah Neal en Sue Walters, I reflect on this role of stranger and the impact of my personal life on the research process. Neal and Walters investigated with qualitative focus group interviews notions of identity and belonging in two contemporary rural social organizations in England. They critically reflect on the impact of their own position to the interview project. Neal and Walter start from the concept the researcher as stranger, drawing on two different theoretical approaches. On the one hand, they refer to Sara Ahmed’s strangers: strangers are not simply those who are not know, but those who are recognized as not-knowing, as not belonging. The stranger is somebody we know as not-knowing. For my narrators I was an unknown researcher too. On the other hand, Neal and Walters refer to Simmels’ notion of objective stranger. A researcher is not radically committed to the

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23Mason, J., Qualitative Researching, London (Sage) 2002, 73.
unique ingredients and peculiar tendencies of the group and therefore approaches them with the specific attitude of 'objectivity'. Moreover, a researcher as stranger can make use of his capacities to switch between nearness and remoteness:

This non-detached objectivity, combined with the (potential) mobility of the stranger can mean that he often receives the most surprising openness [...] he is freer, practically and theoretically; he surveys conditions with less prejudice.

I grew up on the countryside and I’m very familiar with the rural life. At the same time, I’m currently living in a city and I have, just like Sarah Neal, an ambivalent rural identity. Just like Neal and Walters I sometimes stressed my own rural roots or agrarian knowledge and sometimes my urban stranger’s position. The narrators sometimes regarded me as a student, as an expert or as a historian who needed to find the truth. I tergiversated between different roles and different parts of my identity, such as between a country girl and university student, or between a competent and experienced researcher and an ignorant young girl. By emphasizing sometimes my proximity and then again my distance towards the narrators, a surprising openness was created during the interviews.

MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCES IN THE CULTURAL HERITAGE FIELD

Although the concept of intersubjectivity is more or less generally acknowledged in academic oral history, the sensitivity for and reflection upon it are still not so common. This is certainly the case for oral history projects in cultural heritage contexts. In this respect, it is symptomatic that oral historian Nico Wouters stated in his report on Oral History in Belgium in 2011 that:

"On the one hand many historians speak about oral history as a method to study and thus deconstruct memory, reminiscence and representation. But in these participative projects, the historian does the opposite thing and become himself an actor in the construction of the memory."

However, it is clear that the oral historian always is an actor in the construction of the memory. As said, this is not a problem, but we should at least be aware of the input of the researcher and on the ways in which his subjectivity has an impact on the stories that are told. Certainly, this is complex but it is a fundamental issue in oral historical projects. Since it is even in academic milieus not so common, it is very difficult to translate a sensitivity to this intersubjectivity into the heritage practice.

In the rest of this working paper, I will explain how I try, with one little step at a time, to introduce these notions in heritage projects. My methods are influenced and embedded through my past as an academic PhD researcher and my current work as a staff member of the Centre for Agrarian History (CAG). This non-governmental organization is officially recognized by the Flemish Government as an expertise centre for the heritage of agriculture and food. CAG aims to study and safeguard the history of agriculture, countryside and food since 1750.

THE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT ‘SHOP SCOUTS’

The project ‘The shop around the corner’ of the MAS Museum of Antwerp searches stories, documentation and objects about local small food shops from 1950 until today. MAS investigates the continuous evolution of local food shops as places of sale, encounter and exchange in the urban context. The project will result in a series of public presentations, the documentation of a part of the city’s history and a larger involvement of the museum in the city and vice versa.

26Neal and Walters “Strangers asking strange questions”, 180-181.
28Wouters, Mondelinge Geschiedenis in België, 74.
In its role of expertise center, CAG makes part of the steering committee of this project. I am involved in the part project of ‘shop scouts’ in which volunteers search for stories, objects and information about local food shops in three different city parts. In September 2013 an appeal for volunteers was launched and some 30 candidates applied for the function. After an intensive round of interviews Sofie De Ruysser, the project leader of MAS, Nadia Laghwitz of the city’s ‘Dwell & Work’ Service and I selected a team of 15 volunteers. These 15 shops scouts followed in November and December 2013 a training course of 4 evenings in which they learned about the scope and aim of the project, the Museum, the sociological character of the city, and about the history of shopping in the city. I gave an introduction about the method of oral history and focused especially on practical tips and tricks. After this workshop, the volunteers did their first interview. In January and February 2014 we organized two feedback moments in group. Meanwhile, the shop scouts provided their interviews and other sources they founded to the project leader of the MAS. She gave them, when needed, individual feedback by mail or telephone, while she contacted me for tips on oral history methodology. The shop scouts will continue their work until June 2014. In the next paragraphs, I will share some of the advantages and the minus points of this approach.

First of all, it is not easy to set up an oral history project with volunteers with not much or without any experience. Furthermore, there was not much time to introduce them into the world of oral history. In the first workshop for example, I had only one hour to learn them about 'how to interview'. Basically I almost had no time to introduce the concept of self-reflection. Therefore I did not expand on theory but on practical tips and tricks in which I continuously referred to the importance of the role of the interviewer.

What did work well, were concrete questions about their own role or position during the interview. During the first feedback session, one women talked for example about the uncomfortable feeling she experienced while the narrator was talking about ‘those strangers’ in his street. She is herself an immigrant with an obviously other skin color than the narrator. Another shop scout talked about a shopkeeper who was at first a bit reluctant to speak which caused her to feel herself almost forced in the role of an interrogator. After a while, the roles were completely turned because the narrator talked nineteen to the dozen, also on very personal and financial matters, in such a way that the interviewer felt uncomfortable because she heard all those very intimate details. She didn’t dare to ask a lot of questions on that moment. These two examples explained the impact of the role and person of the interviewer more clearly to the rest of the shop scouts then my theoretical explanation in the workshop before.

Because concrete questions worked good for this group, I made a little questionnaire about their own role and feelings as an interviewer. However, only 3 shop scouts did fill in these form. That the whole project was more work than the shop scouts had thought before, is probably the reason for this poor result. Anyhow, I didn’t want to make a solid research, it was - just like the questions I asked them during the feedback sessions – only an attempt to let them reflect about themselves. You cannot measure this self-reflection, especially not in the context of volunteers. But I am convinced that all these little building stones help to introduce the more academic concept of self-reflection also in heritage projects with volunteers. The shop scouts are not asked to analyze their material, that is the task the professional team of the MAS. But with all the encounters during the feedback moments and the little information on the questionnaire, they are able to evaluate the impact of the different interviewers on the interview result.

Second, in the report on Oral History in Belgium from 2011, the systematic context description of oral sources was one of the main recommendations for heritage projects. This is important because of the strong dominance of short term results in the cultural heritage field. Today, most of the oral history projects start with a clear public goal, such as an exhibition, a commemoration, a book, a DVD etc. Once this public goal is achieved, the oral sources are pushed into the background. This dominance of short time results smothers the understanding that these oral sources could also be useful on long term for historical research.²⁹

²⁹Wouters, Mondelinge Geschiedenis in België, 74-75.
In the project of ‘Shop Scouts’ the side documents of the interviews were thus of great importance. Therefore, the shop scouts were asked to fill in different documents to accompany the audio file of the interview. First, they had to fill in a detailed biographical identification file of each respondent. Second, in a similar more technical fiche the volunteers could note some technical details such as place, date, length of the interview together with some remarkable things about the course and the context of the interview. Third, a written contract was made with the explicit consent of the respondent for the use and the storage of the interview by the Museum. Forth, the shop scouts could use a descriptive file to write down some interesting details of objects of archival material they spotted by the shopkeepers. And finally, they weren’t asked to transcribe the whole interview, but they had to fill in a sort of table of contents of the interview, an overview with the different themes of the interview together with time references.

Last but not least, the shop scouts were asked to fill in a journal with all sort of useful details, addresses, impressions, to do lists, ideas, etc. The purpose of this logbook is to read what happened before, how you felt, why you took some decisions etc. In this project the journal is personal, it means that we as coaches did not read it. Nevertheless it is a very useful instrument, according to the reactions of the volunteers. Most of them are using it primarily for practical reasons, to take notes on interesting tracks they want to research or to write down some names, addresses and dates. But, in all contact moments I referred to this journal as a mean in which they could reflect on their own role, position and feelings. Not every shop scout uses his or her journal in this way, it strongly depends on the personality and the dedication of the volunteer. However I believe a journal is a very useful instrument to make volunteers aware of the impact of their own role. One volunteer especially wrote in the little questionnaire that she always write her first impressions of the narrators in the journal and that she experienced it as a very good instrument to reflect about the ‘atmosphere of the interview then the facts’. In this little sentence she actually came to the core of oral history.

WRITING AN ORAL HISTORY MANUAL

CAG has already a lot of experience in interviewing and we can look back on a lot of oral history projects and heritage projects in which oral sources played a (crucial) role. Especially in recent years, many (heritage) actors have been interviewing on the heritage of agriculture, countryside and food, but a structured approach with long-term vision is lacking now. Therefore, CAG wants to play a coordinating and leading role in the field of oral history. With its tight relation with the sister organization ICAG (Interfaculty Centre for Agrarian History, University of Leuven) CAG is very suitable to stimulate the exchange of ideas between academic and heritage sector.

A large part of my time goes to advising and supporting other heritage college in conducting oral history projects. Firstly, I support and coach other professional heritage partners, such as Heritage Cells and museums in their oral history projects, like the ’shop scouts’ project of MAS, as described here above. Secondly, I give advice and workshops in oral history to people or organizations from our heritage community of agriculture, countryside and food. Thirdly, I support my colleagues in their own projects when they want to do oral history interviews themselves.

Currently, I am developing a little manual on oral history in the field of agriculture, countryside and food for my CAG colleagues and interested people of our heritage community. It is possible that this manual will also be available for other colleagues in the broader field of cultural heritage. This manual in the making is partly based on my ongoing collection of experiences during my advisory work and feedback I got. The foundation of this little manual is certainly academic, particularly the book of Bleyen and Van Molle is a large source of inspiration.

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This manual will stress the importance of the contextual documents of oral history interviews. In general we can state that the use of such contextual documents is now becoming more and more common, also in the heritage industry. This is the merit of popular publications as Gestemd Verleden and projects as Van horenzeggen. Still, as stated before, there is a lot of work to do in consideration of a durable storage of oral history sources for possible future research. Therefore, in the future, all CAG interviews (audio files) will be archived accompanied by different extra files. The identification file (with biographical information about the narrator) and technical file (with technical details about the interview) will obviously stay important, just like the agreement, the written contract between CAG and the narrator for the use of the interview.

But CAG wants to go one step further, or two, to be concrete. First, each future CAG-interview will have to be accompanied by a transcription file. This doesn't mean that each interview will have to be entirely transcribed. Nor does it mean that every interview will have to be transcribed in one uniform transcription method. Although Nico Wouters argued in favor of such a uniform transcription method which should be easy accessible in order to transcribe a large set of interviews in a way that favors future historical research, I am convinced that there is no one right way to transcribe interviews. Above all, the transcription should serve the specific research question and approach. A transcription is always a translation of the original interview. There is always a loss of information, and a transcript cannot substitute the original audio file. In the words of oral historian David Kind Dunaway: “when we transcribe, we as much re-create as translate.” I think that a uniform transcription method is not only not realistic, but contains also some dangers. It is not unlikely that one would rely to such an extend to this one and only transcription method, that the original audio file would be neglected and that many interesting details would be lost. I suggest another working method. In the future everybody could still choose the transcription method he prefers. But, and that is very important, it will be strongly advised that this method will be critically explained. This transparency is very important, certainly for future researchers. When there is no transcription made, all interviews should at least have atable of contents of the interview, an overview with the different themes of the interview together with time references.

Secondly, if oral history is intersubjective and researcher and narrator are together responsible for the final result, then it is no more than fair that there is also a file with contextual information about the interviewer himself and about the relation with the narrator. I am still developing the specific form of this file. This contextual file is not intended to filled with a thorough analysis of the intersubjectivity of the interview. It should contain short questions and fill in options that give the (future) researcher enough information for a critical analysis and reflection on the interview result.

This file will contain information on aspects as the atmosphere, the reception of the interviewer, non-verbal attitudes, incidents during the interview, themes that are discussed before or after the recording. There will be also information about the initial public goal of the interview. There will be information on the specific research question and the outcomes, such as an exhibition or a publication for example. Moreover, there will be information on the interviewer himself: biographical information and relevant personal details such as background, knowledge and experience about the interview theme, oral history in general, information about the relation between the interviewer and narrator: if they knew each other before, the way the interviewer contacted the narrator, and his or her first reactions. The interviewer should also describe very briefly his personal feeling(s) during the interview, shortly after the interview and a few days later. At last, a few words should be written about the different roles of the participants: Which role(s) did the interviewer took up: a friend, an expert, researcher, therapist, a confessor, a unknowing student, a stranger, an adept...

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33 Wouters, Mondelinge Geschiedenis in België, 75
CONCLUSION
This working paper shows that we can start to bridge the gap between the practice of oral history projects in the cultural heritage field and academic insights concerning oral history. It is possible to introduce academic concepts such as intersubjectivity and self-reflection in the cultural heritage practice by rather simple measures. I experienced that focusing on concrete examples and questions about the role and the position of the interviewer, works a lot better than a thorough theoretical explanation on intersubjectivity in oral history. A logbook or reflexive journal is a very useful instrument to make volunteers in oral history projects aware of the impact of their own role. In the future I would like to experiment with a practical workshop on oral history with volunteers, focusing on the technique of asking good questions and the importance of the behavior and identity of the interviewer.

The importance of context description of oral sources cannot be underestimated. For oral history projects in the heritage sector it is essential to provide some understandable documents that are easy to fill in with all necessary details. A transcription file that explains critically the chosen transcription method is important. Considering the intersubjectivity of oral history, I am designing a contextual file with some basic information on the interviewer, the relation with the narrator and the interview project. However, a clear and concrete explanation on intersubjectivity and the importance of self-reflection is needed to clarify that filling in such a file is not simply some extra work, but an essential part of the interview practice.

My goal is not to design a standard method or to try to achieve one big standardized oral history field in Flanders. No, I would like to test little efforts on a small scale. This working paper described just the beginning of this process. I am convinced that all these little building stones help to introduce more academic methods into heritage projects. These tiny trials and errors or achievements will certainly change something: “There is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”[Leonard Cohen]
What Happens to Oral History Interviews.

John Barzman
(France):

Resumen: ¿Cuál es la factibilidad de un proyecto cuyo objetivo sería identificar el conjunto de las fuentes de historia oral que existen en una región determinada, difundir el título de las entrevistas colectadas y poner en línea una parte? Esa era la pregunta a la cual se proponía responder el proyecto Val’Or, proyecto de investigación emprendido en 2010 en Normandía.

El informe final de Val’Or, finalizado en octubre de 2013, concluía que:

Este proyecto era el primero de su especie que intentaba coordinar la información en Normandía y seguramente en Francia.

La región estudiada, Normandía (es decir las regiones administrativas de Haute y Basse Normandie) era particularmente rica en número de entrevistas de historia oral que constituyen un verdadero patrimonio inmaterial, aunque solamente parcialmente reconocido por la definición actual del patrimonio cultural inmaterial según la UNESCO.

Este patrimonio inmaterial está diseminado y se encuentra en numerosas instituciones y en posesión de numerosos individuos detentores de soportes, donde es amenazado a causa de su fragilidad física y del carácter temporal de las técnicas de gravación.

Deben ser prioritarias la localización, la clasificación, la numerización y la puesta en línea de fragmentos de este patrimonio inmaterial.

La institución con más capacidad para llevar a cabo esta misión de creación de un «Portal de la Memoria oral» es probablemente una institución de la Región administrativa o interregional, o un establecimiento semipúblico financiado en parte por la Región.

Tal «Portal de la Memoria oral» contribuiría a la atractividad, a la cohesión social y al desarrollo del turismo en la región qui lo iniciaría y lo mantendría.

De manera global, el proyecto confirmó la emergencia del problema y sugirió una comparación de la situación en varios países, algunos más avanzados que Francia, otros que han elegido seguir con la perspectiva artesanal.

Abstract: Is it feasible to identify the bulk of oral history sources already present in a particular region, to advertise the titles of the interviews and begin to make some available on line? This was the question addressed by Val’Or, a research project initiated in 2010 in Normandy.

The final report of Val’Or, submitted in October 2013 concluded that:

Ours was the first report that tried to accomplish this sort of coordination in Normandy and, to our knowledge, in other regions of France.

The region studied, Normandy (i.e. the administrative regions of Haute Normandie and
Basse Normandie) was particularly rich in accumulated oral history interviews, which constitute a genuine intangible heritage, although only partially encompassed by the UNESCO definition of intangible cultural heritage.

This intangible heritage is dispersed among many holding institutions and individuals and endangered by the physical frailty and temporary nature of the recording techniques.

A priority must be given to identify, catalog, digitalize and put on line extracts of this intangible heritage.

The institution most likely to succeed in this task of creating an « Oral Memory Portal » would be a regional or interregional institution or a semi-public body supported by regions.

Such an “Oral Memory Portal” would contribute to the attractiveness, social cohesion and development of tourism of the region which would initiate and maintain it.

Overall, the project confirmed the urgency of the problem and suggested a survey of different countries, some more advanced than France, others still artisanal approach, would be useful.
Is it feasible to identify the bulk of oral history sources already present in a particular region, to advertise the titles of the interviews and begin to make some available on line? This was the question addressed by Val’Or, a research project initiated in 2010 in Normandy. Since that beginning we have found a number of efforts in a similar direction. The one with which we are most familiar is VOAHA, the Virtual Oral/Aural History Archive, located at California State University in Long Beach.

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The initial impulse for the Val’Or project came from researchers in several fields, historians, anthropologists, oral archive professionals, who had conducted campaigns of oral interviews in the last fifteen years, and realized that they had trouble locating the original material, or obtaining legal authorizations to use it. Several of the participants had participated in an attempt to create a French-language oral history network with other practitioners such as Florence Descamps and Véronique Ginouvés, called SOLAR (Sources orales de la recherche).

In the course of our investigation we found that the Ministry of Culture of France had been concerned by this trend towards deterioration of valuable oral sources, and had commissioned a report by two eminent anthropologists which sounded the alarm about the potential loss of thousands of interviews collected by researchers over the past fifty years (Françoise Cribier et Elise Feller, 2003). However that report concerned mainly interviews conducted for research purposes, and not all interviews collected for heritage purposes, by memory associations, families and individuals. Efforts towards conservation were beginning also with the Oral Archives sections of the Archives nationales de France, some Archives départementales (for example the excellent collections of the AD Manche in St Lo), the Bibliothèque nationale and Institut national de l’Audiovisuel, and some associations (such as Mémoire orale de l’industrie et des réseaux). And the national research center, the CNRS, had launched a campaign to digitalize sources used for teaching and research, the Très Grand Equipement (TGE) Adonis, which included a section for digitalizing oral sources, among which, interviews. However, most of these projects moved forward at an extremely slow pace.

Our project decided to investigate the concrete obstacles to the conservation and public use of oral sources at the most local level. We chose the region of Normandy, which we knew well.

The project was based in a research center in Le Havre (IDEES-Le Havre CIRTAI) with the collaboration of other centers in Rouen and Caen, the archives service in St Lo, and several heritage associations. It was
supported by the Region Haute-Normandie from 2011 to 2013. Its official name was "Valorisation de la mémoire orale en Normandie [Val’Or]".

Our work had three prongs:

first, surveying the existing oral testimonies in Normandy held by universities, libraries, museums, archive centers, public institutions [hospitals and others], private enterprises, local associations [maritime heritage, immigration], trade unions, periodicals, families and individuals.

- second, testing the feasibility of conceiving new interviews, designed from the start to be catalogued and put on line with various restrictions on public use, by an institution such as the library of the university of Le Havre.

Third, learning the techniques for digitalizing interviews, analyzing the discourse, indexing the themes, and selecting extracts to be placed on line.

On the first prong, we obtained an incomplete list of about 500 interviews already existing held by a wide variety of receivers. Some were very cooperative, but most often the reaction to our project was a desire for more information before accepting to collaborate. There was a widespread, but unjustified fear, that the present holders of the interviews would lose control over what they considered to be their property if they accepted to enter a wider network. Sometimes, this went to the extent of not revealing the existence of the source the existence of which we had heard about from other quarters. We established a table of relevant information on the interviews (that we were able to identify).

The second prong ran immediately into the juridical problems which have been plaguing the use of oral sources in the last twenty years: who was the author [the interviewee, the interviewer, the producer] of the interview and what were his property rights, at the time the interview was conducted and under the present law. What sort of papers should be signed by the interviewees, for what sort of public exposure. The problem was compounded by differences in the philosophy of the interviewers, ranging from the poetic-artisanal approach of some, through total respect of the intimacy and personal trust of the witness among others, to a very formal and institutional relation with the interviewee among others.-Almost as substantial as the legal quandary was the lack of financial support for creating such an oral archive. The Library already had a budget and goals, and it was not clear what adding an oral testimony collection would mean in terms of budget, necessary skills, time, and in what order what volume of interviews in what state of digitalization would be delivered.

The third prong of the project was far more technical and revealed that the social science researcher and the heritage manager needed a partnership with information sciences specialists, librarians, archivists, engineers in sound and image, linguistic analysts for indexation. Our main contact in this field was with an existing ethnographic network called EthnoDoc-Raddo, which proved to be effective mainly in its own field, but had difficulty connecting with wider networks [national and international].

Overall, the project confirmed the urgency of addressing the problem and suggested that a survey of the situation in different countries, some more advanced than France, others still taking the first artisanal steps, would be useful. Hence our decision to participate in this workshop of the International Oral History Association.
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Approaching the “runaway memory’: Particularities in studying Roma oral histories.

Edmunds Supulis
(Latvia):

Resumen: La cultura romaní tiene su propia forma distintiva de gestionar el pasado. Carece de registros escritos y de prácticas institucionalizadas de conmemoración para preservar la memoria y desarrollar narrativas históricas. ¿Será posible hacer historia oral si usted es un extraño que tiene poco conocimiento de cómo funciona la memoria colectiva de la comunidad? La presentación tiene por objeto mostrar los primeros resultados y conceptualizaciones de un proyecto en curso sobre las narrativas de la historia de vida en diversos entornos étnicos y culturales en Letonia. Entrevistas de historias de vida ya recogidos con los gitanos en Letonia revelan muchos temas relativos a su forma particular de vida, relación con la amplia sociedad y su capacidad para resistir el poder de la sociedad. Conjuntamente con ello el estudio también plantea muchas cuestiones metodológicas. ¿Cómo acercarse a estas historias y validarlas? Tenemos que tener en cuenta: (a) particularidades de la memoria colectiva Romani, y (b) la identidad, la presentación y las posiciones especiales de los sujetos en la situación de entrevista.

Abstract: Romani culture has its own distinct way to manage the past. It lacks written records and institutionalized commemoration practices to preserve memory and to develop historic narratives. Is it possible to do oral history if you are outsider having little awareness how collective memory operates within the community? The presentation is intended to bring first results and conceptualizations from ongoing project about life story narratives within various ethnic and cultural settings in Latvia. Already collected life story interviews with Roma people in Latvia reveal many themes concerning their particular way of life, relation to broad society and their capacities to resist societal power. Along that the study also raises many methodological issues. How to approach these stories, and to validate them? We have to take into account (a) peculiarities of Romani collective memory, and (b) identity, performance, and special subject positions in the interview situation.
INTRODUCTION

Oral histories are depending on group defined social frames of remembrance (Halbwachs’ “collective memory”). It is acknowledged that Gipsy culture lacks written records and institutionalized commemoration practices to maintain (historic) memory, nevertheless, some researchers said\(^35\), the community has its own distinct way to manage the past. Our study takes into account that memory is not something static what people ‘possess’. Rather it is constructed according to cultural codes and prevailing discourses, and is actualized in form of narrative in specific interactive situations (interviews, performances). Collected life story interviews with Roma people in Latvia reveal many themes concerning their particular way of life, relation to broad society and their capacities to resist societal power. Along that the study also raises many methodological issues. What are the forces behind construction of narratives, and the role of interviewer? How the discourse on history is formed in these biographic interviews?

In this paper I will put in front three problematic fields aroused in the initial phase of the study: 1) peculiarity of Romani collective memory (lack of historic narratives, distinct attitude towards the past); 2) Roma memories about German occupation, and then their attitude towards the Soviet past which may contrast with the national historic narrative; and 3) the construction of identities (subject positions in conversation, awareness of otherness, response to social stereotypes).

The presentation is intended to bring first results and conceptualizations from ongoing project about life stories of people within various ethnic and cultural belonging in Latvia.

COLLECTING LIFE STORIES IN LATVIA AND STUDYING BIOGRAPHIC NARRATIVES OF ROMANI

The leading group in life story studies in Latvia is National Oral History project (NOH). It started as an entity in the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology which belongs to University of Latvia in 1992, and since that it has been financed by the Science Council of Latvia. The aim of the NOH project was and still is to explore the lives of the Latvia’s people in their real social and historical contexts and to record the memories of older generation whose life experience covers the most important changes and historical events of Latvian recent history. Therefore life stories are our main source for historical, cultural and sociological studies. There are approximately 4000 audio-recorded life story/biographic interviews in the collection at the present moment. Archive contains particular collections – divisions in groups according to the order of date of acquisition and specific regions they were collected\(^36\). In the beginning of 1990-s after re-establishment of independence, there were the need to rewrite the history, to make a more complete picture of history of Latvia and its people in the 20th century. There were need to restore and to save memories which were not sympathetic to Soviet regime and thus were repressed while Latvia stayed within the Soviet Union (1945-1991).

During the years working with NOH my research interests mainly concentrates on the link between individual story and social representations, interplay between personal/biographic memories and wider politics of memory in given society. Under what circumstances people compose their biographical accounts? How they make a story out of a life? Why one selects those or other events? How strong is an effect of ‘master narratives’? Many questions may come out and many voices are waiting to be heard – we hope to gather them and to answer on few of mentioned questions in our new project which started in the year 2013. The focus will be on life stories of people with different cultural backgrounds, therefore theme was entitled “Ethnic and Narrative Diversity in the Construction of Life Stories in Latvia”.

The major goal of this project is to determine how life stories are influenced and developed by factors like individual’s ethnic and cultural belonging, gender and also by the collective memory of the respective group. The other interests in the study, to count the main, are [1] to examine the structure and content of narratives from a variety of ethnic groups in order to determine how the realization of memories differs or


\(^{36}\) For details please visit www.dzivesstasts.lv
overlaps across the various ethnic and gender groups; [2] to study narratives about various historical periods in the collective memories of different ethnic groups in order to determine the socially significant structures and content of memories; [3] to define the narrative forms that are available to the narrators and that structure the content of the story.

In order to achieve these goals, the team has planned to carry out biographical interviews concentrating on events an individual has personally experienced and that reveal to the researcher both the narrator’s identity, and world view as well as the manner in which this experience is recreated in a story. In other words, how the life story is involved in the structuring of social representation. The project has chosen to focus on three ethnic groups residing in Latvia – Latvian, Russian and Roma. We expect that individual and collective experiences of these groups will reveal and illustrate the interaction between private and public (shared) memories. These three groups also have different social, historical, and cultural experiences, thereby allowing them to be contrasted and compared.

The Roma people are of special interest. In such a way we are following recommendation of Paul Thompson given in his famous book that among main purposes in oral history is to “give voice” to marginalized (or forgotten) individuals and groups, to listen to their stories and give them the possibility to speak from their perspective.

**ROMA COMMUNITY IN LATVIA**

Latvian Gypsies (Roma) is one of the oldest ethnic minorities who live in Latvian territory since the 16th century. In the beginning of 20 century in Russia Tsarist Empire within territories of Vidzeme, Courland, and Latgale there had settled approximately 2000 Gypsies. But this data is problematic and has probably been much higher, as many did not confirm the Roma language as their mother tongue. In Latvia Republic (after the independence in 1918) the numbers increase. They almost doubled because of both the natural increase and the immigration. In 1925 these were 2.78 thousands, 1930. - 3220, 1935. - 3840. And half of the Roma population lived in Courland. It is seen that Roma population is not extremely significant. Like in many countries they were semi-nomadic. Gypsies in Latvia moved seasonally, owned houses, and all in all they fit into the local rural economy. This ensured them relatively fine integration into the Latvian-speaking majority peasant society. Good connection with local society in many cases saved lives during the Holocaust (Porraimos).

Some historians calculate that about half the pre-war population were murdered during the Nazi occupation of Latvia. It is 2000 deaths and few stories of escape. Numbers in comparison with other Baltic countries are shown in the table below.

<table>
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<th>TABLE 1.</th>
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<td>Nowadays the Roma minority is still relatively small, and concentrates in particular towns (in capital city Riga, too). According to population registry statistics provided by the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs there are living 8517 Roma in Latvia (data as of 1 July 2011); it is constituting 0.35% of the total population. We have to admit that data is partial. In some interviews it is mentioned that many people with Romani roots avoid fixing in documents their actual ethnicity, and better choose Latvian or Russian one. Unofficial data on the Roma population guessed by the Roma representatives themselves is very uncertain, too. For example, in 2005 it was estimated that out of the Latvian population (~2 mlj.) there are around 13 000–15 000 Roma. Now it has to be taken into account that from 2007, when a Roma emigration process to EU countries has intensified, the Roma population in Latvia has decreased twice or even three times.</td>
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28 We had asked Roma people how to refer to them, and they have no any objectives at all to call them čigāni (a lagypsies).
Latvian Gypsies have good Latvian and Russian language skills and a large number (98%) of Roma minority have Latvian citizenship. Often it is used as proof of successful integration of Roma into Latvian society. But many surveys concluded that society is still stigmatizing Gypsies and have fear of contact with them. It has to be mentioned that according to statistics only 5% have a paid job, 30% are retired, 10% disabled, but 55% are dependent on parents retirement pay.

Lastly, although there are officially registered twelve NGOs representing Roma interests in 2011, most of these organizations are not sufficiently active in development of civic participation. It is not common for the Roma community to be involved and participate in various government consultative mechanisms.

In general, number of studies about the statistics, demographics, mobility, and security of Roma minorities can be quickly found within international academic research field. Within this quantity yet it is hard to find studies oriented towards the experience of this ethnic group from the biographical perspective. There have been carried some studies out in Latvia too. To mention few main I can refer to the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Latvia as well as other publications made by Latvian Center for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies, Baltic Institute of Social Sciences and others. These studies are very significant and useful as an informative base. However, personal experience, world view, and the values of the members of the ethnic group – all of which can be revealed by a person’s narrative about himself or herself, in other words, a life story – have not been given consideration in the traditional studies. For looking deeper and to catch silenced voices in different communities we started to shape a new study, and our aspirations in 2013 turned out in the project “Ethnic and Narrative Diversity in the Construction of Life Stories in Latvia”. In the last section I will give preliminary results and thoughts from first year study concerning Gipsies’ life stories and oral history.

MEMORY, IDENTITY AND NARRATIVES: BASIC FINDINGS AND QUESTIONS FROM FIELDWORK

Our opening steps in the field was an ‘expedition’ to Kuldīga – the place in Western part of Latvia with traditionally considerable concentration of Roma population. During the fieldwork (in August, 2013) we gathered life story interviews from local Latvians, Russians, and also made six visits to Gypsy persons. Was it easy to get in contact with them? The reference to the local library and their stuff that assisted in obtaining names and addresses was crucial in making first turn towards trustful conversation.

We are expecting that biographical stories, like folk tales, legends and myths as assumed by anthropologists, can serve a window into patterns of culture showing relations between culture and self; it could tell about the formation of their identity, and it is important to see the interaction between the dominant culture and their self-consciousness.

Field work among the Gypsies is like going into the unknown for us. What we had with us? – Personal recorder, some theories and stories previously heard, and different stereotypes more or less we were aware of. After the first contact with Roma respondents the following insights were coming, which ask for closer consideration: undiscovered history and lack of interest to preserve memory; special kind of the community and kinship links which face disintegration; ‘diasporic’ situation and confrontation with strangers; intense try to guess the interviewer’s predisposition to hear something specific, and many biographical ‘gaps’ (probably because of attachment to semi-criminal past); and, overall cultural threat - the transition to settled mode, loss of tradition, identity concealment.

The initial directions we are currently working on can be summarized along three issues:

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1) ‘Management of the past’ in Romani culture. Do they have a distinct attitude towards the past? What are the peculiarities of Romani collective memory?

2) ‘Grand’ national narrative and Romani experience. How they see themselves in the recent history of Latvia? The special interest we put on the attitude towards the Soviet past among Gypsies and their historic memory about German occupation.

3) Roma identity question. How their identities are constructed in everyday life and in the interview situation? What life stories say about experience of ‘otherness’?

The first aspect concerns theoretical question about collective memory and historic narratives in a given community. To make a story out of a life we are doing more or less conscious selection of memorized events, we put it into the plot thus creating a sense in the life-course narrative. Cultural and political settings have to be considered here too. Why for our respondents (i.e. life story tellers) something is easier to express, and more quickly, with plenty of details; although for big part of experience the words are in shortage? Sometimes recollections are brighter, however in certain moments they are blurring. Memory issues within sociology and cultural anthropology studies has been analyzed not like a merely personal cognitive or emotive process, but is seen as a collective social practice by which human groups attempt to deal with the past in the present. Already in twenties of 20 century Maurice Halbwachs wrote about social frameworks of memory – that only in group context memory survive and recollections are backed up; there must be a collective memory towards which individuals are oriented. Collective memory can be defined as a representation of the past shared by members of a group (like generations or nations). He argued that remembering is shaped by involvement in collective life and that different groups generate different accounts of the past.

While Halbwachs emphasised people around, later then Michael Foucault in his “archaeological” studies talks about meta-individual discourses as determinants on what way to think about the things and how to speak out that, to make statements. Who or what is in charge of that process? The answers vary. But function is obvious –collective memory represents the way in which national communities incorporate (or exclude) their conflictive and painful pasts into the present. To make this past usable for present needs. Politics of memory is a concept which is employed when analyzing private experience and public representations. It may be used when one is focusing on interplay between memory and social forces concerning past events.

In case of Romani culture it must be acknowledged that many authors agree on peculiar character of “memory regime” within Gypsy communities, and even lack of interest in the past. Alaina Lemon in her book reminds us, “Gypsies are usually depicted not only as people “without history” but as indifferent to recollection, living in an ‘eternal present’”. At the same time, it is stressed in the article of Paloma Gay y Blasco, that understanding Gypsies’ way of dealing with the ‘before’ is essential to understanding their particular way of being in the world, as well as how they face non-gypsies and reproduce themselves as a distinct. She also notes that obliteration of the past, detected in Roma culture, is best understood as a transformation of memory which has constructive social effects rather than as undesirable form of communal amnesia.

What Roma people lack indeed, because of traditionally nomad way of life and weak national consciousness, is significant “realms of memory” [P.Nora]. It allows Lemon to conclude that problem then is not in neglecting history, but that no infrastructure magnifies Romani memories as broadly collective, as constituting as “imagined community”.

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50 Ibid. P.167.
Nevertheless our interviews show they have their autobiographic reminiscences and so possibility for oral history. It principally concerns their experience of Communist rule (which contrast to official narrative about that regime) and Roma 'local' collective memory about persecutions under Nazi regime. It is second aspect I want to briefly highlight here.

The experience of the Holocaust by Gypsies in Latvia territory deserves special focused study. I will even not try to depict it in the limits of this paper. Still, we have asked Roma interviewees to recall any narratives about living under German occupation during WWII. Their memories (mostly acquired from relatives) vary from recollections about peaceful coexistence with German troops and authorities [even serving for military needs] to the stories of murder and miracle-like salvation. The first impression, however, may be close to what gypsolorist Stewart wrote that these memories do not seem to be part of a process of remembering which involves the possession and sharing of a historic narrative. These stories fit to the general narratives of violence and prejudices against Gypsies, and all in all the coming of Red Army and establishment of the Soviet regime brought some positive changes as it is told in Roma life stories. It is already studied that in the Communist era [which was a period of increasing 'proletarisation'] in spite of continuing discrimination Gypsies were able to benefit from regular wages to improve their social situation (new houses and sending their children to school). It is for the first time in history when a large number of Roma had the opportunity to achieve some sort of limited integration into wider society, writes Guy about Eastern Europe. This also resonates in our interviews. Roma people remember Soviet period as a time of stability and a 'lightness' in ensuring at least convenient standard of living both by working in the fields of collective farms (Kolkhoz) and using Socialistic "deficit economy" to trade goods [unofficially, of course]. Poor condition of Gypsies today makes very explicit the sympathy towards 'Soviet times' in Roma biographic narratives. In that sense these recollections may be set in contrast to the 'official' Latvian national historic narrative which contains definitely negative representation about the past under Soviet occupation. The public memory in Latvia after regaining independence in 1991 became a space of political struggle. It represents the efforts of ethnic Latvians who suffer under Communist rule to make their version for the basis of national identity. And on the national level there is little room for recollections of Socialism era if they do not fit in the discourse on how to treat Socialism today. In that way Roma collective memory is in conflict with national mnemonic praxis which has a tendency to downgrade everything connected to Socialism and to Soviet Union especially. Again this question of 'clash of memories' deserves more attention in further studies to depict Roma identity within society and political culture of Latvia.

Here one could start studies in oral history; however a critical remark may be raised concerning validity of straight approach to Roma community as long as we know that there is a unambiguous distinction between 'us and them' in Romani culture. Thus the question of reliability [authenticity of the life story] should be stressed out. Are these they real biographical experiences? Who we are for them to trust us, to share intimate memories? What their story was intended for in fact? There are some doubt whether our tellers rely on us or we are basically representing 'significant strangers' [or at least some state/municipal agents], and interview was nothing but a kind of performance with little connection to actual feelings and thoughts. We were amazed for it is quite often that Gipsies in our interviews are referring to themselves as being "the-same-as-you-Latvians". That from time to time appeared denial of distinct identity asks for special attention and interpretation. Do they want simply to adjust to our expectations [as it could be seen from interviewee position]? It have to be interpreted what subject positions are at hand in the conversation between people from distant statuses. Questions about what really happens in communication may be more than it is desirable if we want to proceed in making concrete oral history. So I will put last notion – interviews have to be treated not merely as a window to experience and memory, it become clear that biographic narratives might be actively constructed during interaction; that must be considered for


analysis along with the actual information provided in the oral history interview. Close looking to narratives from Romani may reveal as well as how things are perceived as how ‘things’ (stories, distinctions, identities) are done when their culture meets alien one.