### TABLE 72

**Supervivencia, sexismo y sentido del humor en la Segunda Guerra Mundial**  
*Survival, sexism and and a sense of humor in World War II*

**Chair**  
*Anne Valk (US):*  
Stewards of the Pond:  
Public Engagement with a Natural Site.

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- **Karen Horn** (South Africa):  
  "South African Prisoners-of-War in World War II: Silent Voices in Transition."

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- **Kirsi-Maria Hytönen** (Finland):  
  "‘I can prove you I’m a virgin’: Women’s memories of sexual humor in Finnish factories during the Second World War."

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- **Daniel Swan** (UK):  
  "‘It’s because we’re just women’: Female reflections of the self in the workplace during the Second World War."

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- **Georgios Michalopoulos** (Greece):  
  "‘The stone fences were our billboards’: Graffiti in occupied Athens, 1941-44"
Stewards of the Pond: Public Engagement with a Natural Site.

Anne Valk (chair):
(US)

Resumen:  Este trabajo analiza las entrevistas de historia oral que documentan la historia de la interacción humana con Mashapaug Estanque en Providence, Rhode Island (EE.UU.). Desde 2011, los estudiantes del centro de humanidades públicas de la Universidad de Brown y artistas de la charca Procesión Urbano (que utiliza las artes para promover la salud de los estanques urbanos de Rhode Island) han recogido entrevistas de historia oral y realizar la investigación histórica relacionada con el estanque. Mashapaug Estanque ayudó industria Providence combustible; también se convirtió en un vertedero de residuos industriales. Este proyecto de colaboración explora cómo el arte y la historia oral puede traer la nueva atención a los lugares abandonados con importancia cultural e histórica. Al compartir públicamente historias de Mashapaug, recogidos a través de entrevistas y se muestran a través de la instalación de audio y exposiciones temporales, puede un proyecto de historia oral estimular el interés y la acción para remediar o proteger el medio ambiente natural? Las entrevistas documentan muchas formas de interacción con Mashapaug, incluyendo recuerdos de antiguos empleados de una empresa de fabricación de plata en la costa este de la charca, y ahora una zona industrial abandonada; recuerdos de la infancia de la pesca, la natación y el patinaje sobre Mashapaug; cuentas de los pueblos indígenas que se asentaron a orillas del Mashapaug donde vivieron hasta desplazadas por la construcción de un parque industrial en la década de 1960; y los esfuerzos contemporáneos para remediar condiciones peligrosas causadas por la escorrentía industrial de drenaje de dumping y la tormenta. Centrándose específicamente en las formas de los entrevistados recuerdan el dumping industrial y revelan su comprensión de las condiciones ambientales contemporáneas en el sitio, este trabajo examina cómo este proyecto ha participado historias de la comunidad para hablar con los intereses actuales y traer la nueva atención a la charca.

Abstract:  This paper analyzes oral history interviews that document the history of human interaction with Mashapaug Pond in Providence, Rhode Island (U.S.). Since 2011, students from Brown University’s public humanities center and artists from the Urban Pond Procession (which uses the arts to promote the health of urban ponds in Rhode Island) have collected oral history interviews and conduct historical research related to the Pond. Mashapaug Pond helped fuel Providence industry; it also became a dumping ground for industrial waste. This collaborative project explores how art and oral history can bring new attention to neglected places with cultural and historical significance. By publicly sharing stories of Mashapaug, collected through interviews and displayed through audio installation and temporary exhibits, can an oral history project stimulate interest and action to remediate or protect the natural environment? The interviews document many forms of interaction with Mashapaug, including recollections of former employees of a silver manufacturing company on the Pond’s eastern shore, and now a brownfield site; childhood memories of fishing, swimming, and skating on Mashapaug; accounts of Indigenous peoples who settled on Mashapaug’s banks where they lived until displaced by the construction of an industrial park in the 1960s; and contemporary efforts to remediate dangerous conditions caused by industrial dumping and storm drain runoff.
specifically on the ways interviewees remember industrial dumping and reveal their understanding of contemporary environmental conditions at the site, this paper examines how this project has engaged community stories to speak to contemporary interests and bring new attention to the Pond.
Near the start of a recent oral history interview, Dick Chatowsky shared an animated remembrance of Mashapaug Pond in Providence, Rhode Island (U.S.A.). After mentioning the streets where he lived and Gorham Silver Manufacturing Company, where his mother worked, Chatowsky offered an environmental history of the pond at the neighborhood’s center: “I can remember that dump at Gorham’s,” he recalled. “I can remember – vividly – all that silver polish that was unused, that was on the edge of the bank at Gorhams. And when it rained, that pink silver polish would run down into the cove….I can remember tank trucks backing up to the edge of the dump, and the guy would open up a valve in the back of the tank truck, and all these plating fluids...you know, there were no places to recycle back then. And like I say, everybody in the world, even the old timers, the old farmers down where I live in Hope Valley, they had a broken tractor or all their tin cans or anything, they went and threw it in the brook behind the house. You know, that was the norm back then. But I can remember that tank trunk, emptying that, whatever fluid it was. It was green in color...... I know there was a lot of pollutants dumped by everybody in that pond. Mashapaug Pond turned into the dump site of Providence.”

Rhode Island claims to be the ‘birthplace of the Industrial Revolution in America,’ and industry transformed the physical landscape, altering the terrain where people lived and spent leisure time, as well as where they spent their working hours. A more recent loss of manufacturing after the Second World War again redefined the nature of work and altered residents’ sense of connection to place. These waves of change especially characterize the southwest corner of the city, Dick Chatowsky’s former neighborhood, where open spaces succumbed to the rush to build factories and housing for workers in the late 19th century. Public work projects filled in small ponds between the 1860s and 1930s, creating housing for workers and factories on top of what had been water and marshy land. Mashapaug Pond survived the industrial era, albeit significantly changed by the human activity and the ring of factories that surrounded it. The last big manufacturer, Gorham Silver Manufacturing Company, abandoned Mashapaug’s shores in the 1980s, leaving residents to confront the lingering effects of industrial waste on community health and development, as well as community memory and community identity.

This article draws on oral history to understand community responses to many changes to the natural and manmade environment near Mashapaug over the past fifty years. Industry – and its departure – impelled Providence residents to address seismic shifts in the economy, environment and community. These changes include a loss of manufacturing jobs and factory buildings; reluctant displacement – or voluntary departure -- of people from neighborhoods where jobs disappeared and new industry failed to take root; the incorporation of new residents into areas next to the pond, many new to Providence and to the U.S.; and toxic conditions at and near the Pond itself. Such changes have left residents struggling to make sense of the troubled landscape they have inherited.

At the same time that deindustrialization produced a host of problems, the departure of manufacturing unintentionally has created openings for innovative community responses. An ongoing partnership between the Urban Pond Procession (UPP) and Brown University’s Center for Public Humanities (CPH), aims to fire residents’ collective imagination about Mashapaug, a 144-acre pond at the center of efforts by activists, artists, teachers, public workers, and local families. The project uses art and history to record community memories and help community members “connect the way things were to what they can be.”

Over the course of three years, the partnership between UPP and CPH has collected dozens of life history interviews with former and current residents of neighborhoods near Mashapaug; workers previously employed at nearby industrial sites; and those acting to better environmental and social conditions in the area. The Mashapaug Pond Project uses oral history to document people’s memories and perceptions of

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1 Richard Chatowsky, interview by Rachel Shipps, March 12, 2014, Mashapaug Pond Collection, Brown Digital Repository, https://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/collections/d_617/ (unless otherwise noted, all subsequent interviews come from this same repository)
3 Community Health Advocates meeting with Oral History and Community Memory class, Brown University, February 25, 2014, tape recording in author’s possession.
the pond and surrounding areas and then creatively shares the interviews in order to encourage new ways to look at, interact with, and care for the pond. The interviews are available through a digital archive and have been used in a cell phone audio tour, traveling exhibit, onsite installations, materials for teaching artists and middle and high school students, and public workshops. In addition to this rich archive of materials, the project seeks to generate other, less tangible outcomes. For students and community members, art and oral history tie memories to places around Mashapaug, helping to connect people to each other, creating temporal links between past, present and future, and shaping collective understandings of the site through stories.4

After providing historical background, this paper explores what oral history interviews reveal about the significance of Mashapaug and the impact of deindustrialization on community memory and identity. It focuses particularly on accounts related to memories of people’s interactions with the pond, especially stories related to environmental contamination at nearby former factory sites and hazardous waste in the water. The interviews provide tragic commentary on the environmental impact of industrial production; they also reveal how residents assess the impact of that history on the present and how they imagine the future. By offering stories about what the pond used to be like and preserving stories of people who remember the pond as a place where children could explore and play, oral history provides one tool to connect (or reconnect) Providence residents to Mashapaug and other natural spaces.

Caption: An 1895 map showing Mashapaug Pond with Gorham Manufacturing Company on the eastern shore.

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4 The digital repository is available at http://repository.library.brown.edu/studio/collections/id_617/. Projects created as part of this collaboration can be seen at http://reserveofmemories.omeka.net and http://storiesfrombeyondthepond.org.
CONTEXT:
American Enamel Company, ice houses, and numerous factory buildings edged Mashapaug Pond into the 20th century. For all of these industries, Mashapaug provided needed resources and became a dumping ground for chemicals and waste used in, or generated by, industrial processes. These manuf acturies were dwarfed, however, by the Gorham Silver Manufacturing Company which built a state-of-the-art facility next to Mashapaug in 1890. At its peak, Gorham was the largest silver plant in the U.S., sprawling over 37 acres and employing more than 4,000 people to produce ornate tableware, weighty monuments, and smaller decorative pieces in its iron, brass, silver, and gold foundries. After surviving more than a century, the company began a slow decline after World War II. A Providence-based conglom erate, Textron bought Gorham in 1967 and by the late 1980s, Textron had sold off or moved away production and the plant on the edge of the pond had closed.

At Mashapaug Pond, the closing of Gorham and other manufacturing plants led to a large loss of jobs and shift in population; it also created the opportunity for residents to preserve, conserve, and re-use historic and natural resources, sometimes working against city officials. In the 1980s, residents took pride in the pond, celebrating it with an annual festival and encouraging people to come fish. In the 1990s, residents organized to stop two housing developments and to create small public parks near the pond instead. But when the city tried to develop the site where Gorham had been, residents discovered extensive and severe hazardous waste. This contamination meant that expensive clean up was required. The state Department of Environmental Management and groups of activists and parents have since forced Textron and the city of Providence to remediate the site. That work is progressing gradually. The first parcels were capped in order to build a shopping mall and a high school. A third parcel will be turned into a park (behind the high school and on the pond’s edge) by the end of 2014.

Nearby residents now confront the legacy of industrial waste, as well as the wasting impact of deindustrialization on the economic and cultural life of the city. Just as the growth of industry reshaped the city’s environment, deindustrialization, white flight, and other alterations in the physical and social landscape of the city frayed people’s connections to their neighborhoods. Between 1980-1990, for example, white families like Dick Chatowsky’s left their homes around the pond but the neighborhoods experienced a 500% increase in the numbers of African American, Asian, and Latino residents. Many of these families were new to the area and to the U.S. Although they cannot remember Providence as an industrial city, they have inherited stories about Gorham, Mashapaug, and the pollution that remains.

ORAL HISTORY AND COMMUNITY MEMORY
Oral history interviews add rich layers to the local history and reveal the significance of Mashapaug Pond and Gorham to members of the local community. The interviews document the history of neighborhood interactions with the pond and emerging understandings of the consequences of industrial production on the local economy and environment. Moreover, the interviews suggest how new information about the toxic conditions at the Gorham site and in the pond are being incorporated into the collective memory of area residents and are shaping public perceptions of the site.

To date, Brown University students, working through the Center for Public Humanities and in collaboration with the Urban Pond Procession, have collected more than sixty interviews that document a range of perspectives and connections to Mashapaug and the nearby area. The collection includes interviews with

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9 Providence Neighborhood Fact Book (Providence: the Providence Plan, 1994), B-1.
former inhabitants of neighborhoods surrounding the Pond; current residents of those areas; environmental activists and community health advocates; and former employees of Gorham. These categories of narrators sometimes overlap, such as current residents who are now taking action to clean up the polluted pond, and former residents whose parents worked at Gorham. Most interviews focus on individuals’ memories of the site and the surrounding area. A small group of professionals whose work incorporates remediation of the former Gorham site also were interviewed and asked to detail how Textron, the state Department of Environmental Management and Department of Public Health, and the city’s parks department are working to clean up the area’s water and land.11

Revelations about the toxic conditions at the pond and the Gorham site have shaped people’s memories about their past interactions with these areas, and they color the experiences of people who live nearby today. More recent knowledge about toxic conditions around Gorham pollute former residents’ understanding of the place and their own interactions with the natural and built environment. At the same time, new residents get introduced to a historical narrative that emphasizes contamination and generates a culture of fear.

Because our interviews only began in 2011, it is impossible to know how individual’s memories of Mashapaug and Gorham have changed over time. The Mashapaug Pond Project’s connection with the UPP, one of the organizations visibly involved in the cleanup efforts probably shapes the kinds of associations that people raise when they are interviewed.12 Even recognizing these limitations, the interviews reveal people’s active efforts to reshape their reflections in order to make sense of new knowledge about the site. Specifically, this can be seen in interviewees’ musings about the impact of industry on the natural environment and questions about impact on the health of former workers and current residents. Robin Tagliaferri, for example, questioned the causes of her grandfather’s 1975 death. He worked at Gorham for forty years, some of that time enduring tough conditions in the company’s bronze foundry. “I actually have a death certificate that lists a cause of death,” Tagliaferri told her interviewer. “Because we do believe, my recollection is that he did have emphysema. He was sick for a number of years suffering from that. So of course he did smoke, he did smoke. And you wonder too if maybe some of the effects of being in a bronze foundry so many years was part of what caused his illness.”13 Similarly, Henry Marciano, now a retired social studies teacher who grew up on a street bordering the Gorham complex, wondered about the connections between his father’s death and his work at Gorham. Marciano recalled, “My father worked at Gorham’s …. [in] the smelting department, where they had to pour silver into lead containers to serve as molds to fabricate the silverware that they were making. And I don’t know if that had any connection to what he died of in the end, which was Parkinson’s disease, complications of Parkinson’s. But I know that lead causes brain damage, and Parkinson’s does cause brain damage, so there must be some connection.” Marciano’s questions about his father’s death also led him to map disease onto the geography of the site. “And when they tore down the facility, I toured the remains of the site,” Marciano shared. “I tried to wonder what part of this plant my father worked in. And I’m looking all around, and then some old-timer told me that it was [in an area] where Textron is trying to clean up now. And I started to cry…. But I often wonder about those poor people who worked there, and I know that a lot of them died of cancer. I was told that by an old-timer, so it’s a kind of tragic, the legacy of the industrial revolution.”14

The acknowledgement of Gorham’s contamination of the land and the water has loosened local memories of dumping and waste heaps. When Dick Chatowsky, who grew up blocks from Gorham, was asked to talk about his childhood, he recalled that the silver company and other manufacturers regularly dumped liquid

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12 As numerous oral historians have argued, interviews are co-created sources that reflect the authority and interpretation of the interviewer and narrator. For example, see Valerie Yow, “Do I Like Them Too Much? Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa,” Oral History Review, 24 (1997): 55-79.
13 Robin Tagliaferri, interview by Maria Qunitero, November 1, 2011.
14 Henry Marciano, interview by Anna Wada and Elizabeth Landau, November 19, 2011.
and solid wastes into the pond and on the shore. “And I can remember them dumping stuff into that pond. And we used to, in the summer time, we used to get this green algae in the pond. Now, whether it was caused by what [manufacturing companies] had put into that pond or not, I don’t know. But I can remember this green algae that would be in Mashapaug Pond and it would build up on the shoreline and as it dried out, it had the most ungodly smell to it. It had an awful smell to it. And it was kind of a greenish-bluish algae..... It was actually like paste. It was in the water, you could see it on the top of the water. And as wind blew it along the shorelines, whatever way the wind was blowing, the shoreline would be covered with this green algae. And we always thought it came from ...from the brewery but I couldn’t swear to that. Maybe it was just a natural algae that grew in Mashapaug Pond from something else. But I can remember that. I can remember that as clear as day, that green algae in Mashapaug Pond.”

For the young Chatowsky, the dumping and the unnatural color of the pond have remained memorable but these conditions didn’t stop him from spending many hours playing at and in the pond. Similarly, Al Campbell recalled that during hockey games played on Mashapaug, boys would break holes in the ice to sip the water. “Then the following spring, when we would be over by the pond, we would be looking at the water and it would have this green color and we would think back to the winter when we were drinking that water and we used to say, ‘geez, it didn’t taste that bad, but something’s wrong here.’” Bill Simmons remembered hearing warnings that underground springs made Mashapaug unsafe for swimming. “We just knew it was dangerous,” Simmons said, “And, it partly could have had something to do with the pollution from Gorham’s manufacturing.”

Ed Hooks, who lived on the side of the pond opposite the Gorham site, traced his growing awareness of pollution at the site to his more recent awareness of Gorham’s irresponsible actions. “I was thinking of it,” Hooks recalled, “walking around, there are no frogs in Mashapaug Pond now, but there were frogs during the ’50s. Now why is that significant? It’s significant because frogs breathe through their skin. And any bit of pollution- if the water’s polluted and the like, frogs are going to die. And you had bull frogs and leopard frogs and green frogs and today there are none. So, even with that in mind, I begin to wonder how polluted was Mashapaug Pond during the ’50s?....when I was growing up, I don’t think we heard that it was polluted. I mean we swam in it. But after...the demise of Gorhams, then we heard that it was very polluted.... I say I would swear on your stack of bibles that there were frogs there. I know there was frogs there then. And the past forty years there are none.”

Newspapers and other sources provide evidence that public health officials and some area residents had worried about the health of Mashapaug Pond for many decades, including before and during the 1940s and 1950s, the time that Chatowsky, Campbell, Simmons and Hooks recall. This documentary evidence from written accounts differs from the interviews with residents which suggest a more recent awareness of pollution at the site. The interviews also demonstrate residents’ attempts to incorporate more recent understandings about the pond into their memories from the past. Scholar Alessandro Portelli has argued that oral history’s value lies, in part, in what it can reveal about the significance of past events to the narrators’ effort to make sense of the past and to give a form to their lives, and set the interview in their ability to preserve the past, as in the very changes wrought by memory. These changes reveal the narrators’ effort to make sense of the past and to give a form to their lives, and set the interview and narrative in their historical context. These accounts support Portelli’s assertion, showing how Providence residents now understand their past activities at and around Mashapaug in light of a prevailing narrative about waste and unhealthy conditions on its shores. The interviews suggest that a new
awareness of the environmental legacy of industry is, in a sense, contaminating otherwise happy memories of childhood games and adventures. A new narrative of Gorham, Mashapaug Pond and other adjacent industrial sites is forming in the collective memory of Providence residents.

In contrast to the former residents, newcomers to the area – current occupants of the neighboring streets – have few first-hand stories of Gorham and little memory of industry in Providence. Their sense of the place comes from more recent stories about pollution and other dangers at the site. None remember seeing dumping into the pond but Sam Prak remembers that when he moved to the neighborhood in the 1990s, people told him the Gorham plant was “haunted” and that he should stay away. Dulce Bodden, who describes herself as one of the “first Spanish people” to move to the area, recalled that she knew nothing about Gorham or the polluted pond until plans to build the high school on the site were announced. “I was really unaware of it, until recently. That was brought up, and I heard about the high school that was going to be built there. And I was concerned about it when I heard about all the residue from the Gorham factory...But I wasn’t quite aware of the magnitude of all that Gorham had left there. And I know there was some burial, like some tanks were buried underneath. So all that poison. And I also heard that... there’s significant increase in cancer from the people that live in that section, like right near the pond.” Sokeo Ros, who now lives right across from the former Gorham plant indicated that “I’ve heard about it being contaminated. So my gut reaction is just – stay away from it. I mean, I drive by it or walk around it, but we never really go near it. I don’t know if it’s in the air or stuff like that... I’ve heard rumors, stuff like, “Oh, it’s so contaminated you don’t even want to go there,” “The air’s bad,” or whatever...” For Ros, Bodden and other current residents, their understanding of the place is suffused by concerns about pollution that is invisible but everywhere, contaminating the air, the soil, the water, and buried underground.

CONCLUSION:
Public historians have shown how historical research can lead to new and important strategies for the preservation of natural areas. For the Mashapaug Pond Project, oral history makes a significant contribution to local efforts to connect residents to ‘natural spaces’ like the pond in several ways. First, as historian Ned Kaufman argues, “assaults against the environment...are often assaults on culture too.” The interviews validate and preserve the stories of human interactions and cultural practices at Mashapaug. This includes the activities of residents who struggled to create parks and green spaces in the city and the current cleanup efforts that will one day be part of local history. They also preserve the stories of people who remember the pond and its surroundings in a different way, before the revelations of pollution. But while allowing for nostalgic remembrances of childhood adventures in the outdoors, the interviews also validate the memories of individuals who can describe past occurrences of dumping at the site, a practice generally not detailed in written documents. Thus, the interviews offer more complex ways to understand human interactions with so-called ‘natural spaces’ and add historical context to public awareness of waste, pollution, and hazardous conditions.

Moreover, for activists and advocates of community health and environmental cleanup, the interviews have tangible uses. Documenting current residents’ awareness of the dangers at the site, they provide information that can help to hone the message or approaches of campaigns to inform people of public health concerns or to mobilize neighbors to take action. The memories of former residents, which emphasize incidents of dangerous dumping into Mashapaug, and the impressions of danger held by current residents, create an overlapping set of perceptions and associations that could be useful to current efforts to raise public awareness about the pond and to generate collective action to reclaim the site as a community resource. Indeed, the Mashapaug Pond Project tries to do just that. The oral history interviews have been used to educate teachers and students, including those at schools bordering the

22 Sam Prak, interview by Emily McDaniel, April 13, 2013.
pond and at Brown University, in order to raise their awareness about the history of the pond and the environmental conditions there. In addition, the interviews have been incorporated into public art and onsite installations intended to increase residents’ awareness of current conditions, knowledge of its past, and imagination about its future. It is too soon to tell whether the exhibits, audio installations, public programs and other gatherings that have used the Mashapaug archive will impact people’s narratives about the pond or translate into successful efforts to change conditions there. But the Mashapaug Pond Project hopes its work can affect people’s interactions with the site. As one current resident recently said, “It’s hard to know what’s possible in the future if we aren’t aware of what has already existed. Sometimes in our everyday lives we don’t realize what we’ve lost – a swimming hole, a bird habitat – until we hear the stories about how things used to be, the stories your elderly neighbors tell about when they were children, for example. Once you have that knowledge, you yearn for something you had not even realized might be possible, such as a reinstatement of an environment that you assumed was gone forever.” The narratives about the pond and the neighborhood, whether rooted in first-hand memories about pollution or in community lore, suggest a way to inspire such imagination and build common interests between people with divergent positions but a shared interest in the past, present and future of Mashapaug Pond.

26 Laura Maxwell, email communication with Holly Ewald, March 19, 2014.
Esta tesis narra y analiza las experiencias de un grupo de sudafricanos que fueron capturados durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial.

La investigación está basada en testimonios orales, memorias, evidencias de archivo y en menor medida en fuentes secundarias. Los antiguos prisioneros de guerra que participaron en la investigación y aquellos cuyas memorias han sido estudiadas, fueron capturados en la batalla de Sidi Rezegh en noviembre 1941 o durante la caída de Tobruk en junio de 1942.

El propósito de la investigación es presentar el testimonio oral y escrito de los prisioneros de guerra con el fin de acabar con la falta de conocimiento respecto a la experiencia histórica de los prisioneros de guerra sudafricanos.

El ámbito de la investigación incluye lo siguiente: la decisión de ofrecerse como voluntarios para la Union Defence Force, las experiencias en el norte de África, la captura y experiencias iniciales en los llamados “campos del infierno” del norte de África, el traslado a Italia y la vida en los campos de prisioneros italianos, los eventos que rodearon el armisticio italiano y los consiguientes intentos de escape a partir de entonces.

Para aquellos prisioneros de guerra que no escaparon, la cautividad continuó con el traslado a Alemania, experiencias en campos alemanes que incluyeron campos de trabajo y la campaña de los bombardeos aliados.

Por último, se presta especial atención al final de la guerra y la experiencia de la liberación, que en muchos casos incluía marchas forzadas, antes de que el foco vuelva una vez más hacia Sudáfrica y la experiencia de la vuelta a casa y la desmovilización.

Las experiencias afectivas e intelectuales de los prisioneros de guerra son investigadas, mientras que sus experiencias personales y emociones son presentadas y examinadas. Éstas incluyen las experiencias de culpa y vergüenza durante la captura, la aceptación o no aceptación de la cautividad, el sentimiento de culpa, la actitud hacia el enemigo y entre sí, además de la experiencia de miedo y esperanza, que fueron especialmente relevantes durante la campaña de bombardeos y durante periodos cuando eran trasladados entre países y campos.

La tesis concluye con un análisis de la experiencia de los prisioneros de guerra, asociado a los aspectos relacionados a la identidad dentro de los prisioneros de guerra sudafricanos.

La conclusión final a la que se llega es que la identidad de los prisioneros de guerra tuvo prioridad sobre la identidad nacional. Como resultado de la fuerte identidad de los prisioneros de guerra, su deseo de completa libertad y el deseo de reclamar individualidad, los prisioneros de guerra en su conjunto no demostraron gran interés en volverse involucrados en la política sudafricana después de la guerra, a pesar de que muchos de ellos estaban en desacuerdo con las ideologías nacionalistas segregacionistas que gozaban de un apoyo creciente entre 1945 y 1948.
Abstract: It was in November 1941 and June 1942 that the North African desert and the German Afrika Korps captured thousands of Union Defence Force (UDF) soldiers. They endured the same hardships as Allied POWs from the various Commonwealth nations, with the only significant distinction that of the Afrikaans-speaking volunteers who joined the UDF for economic reasons and the English-speaking South Africans who volunteered out of loyalty to the Empire. However, their attitude towards the war and their reasons for volunteering did not considerably alter their POW experience. It was upon their return to South Africa that their experience differed markedly from their Commonwealth counterparts as the nationalist Government in South Africa worked to silence the voice of the veterans and downplayed the country’s role in the war. During 2010 a number of former POWs were interviewed as part of research towards a PhD thesis, and it is these interviews that form the basis of this paper.

The aim of this paper is firstly to illustrate how interviews with former POWs enabled a narrative description of their war experiences. By comparing oral testimony with written memoirs, the impact of memory and hindsight is exposed. Secondly, having considered issues of historical accuracy, the focus becomes more analytical in nature as the subject of concerns turns to historical significance. In the context of this study, the question is asked if historical significance takes precedence over the perceived importance of historical accuracy. The issue becomes even more pertinent when one considers that for most interviewees, the opportunity to narrate their experiences 65 years after the war was the first time they were able to make their voice heard, even following the democratization of the country in 1994.
INTRODUCTION

‘I didn’t want to talk about it anyway’, is how David Brokensha initially explained his long silence regarding his experiences in prisoner-of-war camps during World War II.27 This paper does not intend to make profound statements regarding the methodology of oral history, but it intends illustrate how vital elements of history can be lost if there is on the one hand an overemphasis on particular historical themes, or on the other hand a disregard for oral history as a research method. This paper firstly illustrates how interviews with former POWs enabled a narrative description of their war experiences. By comparing their oral testimony with their earlier written memoirs, the impact of memory and hindsight is exposed, especially with regard to historical accuracy. Secondly, having considered issues of historical accuracy of their POW experiences, the focus becomes more analytical in nature as the subject of concerns turns to the significance of the narrative in the broader framework of the national historiography. In the context of this study, the question is asked if historical significance takes precedence over the perceived importance of historical accuracy. The issue becomes even more pertinent when one considers that for most interviewees, the opportunity to narrate their experiences 65 years after the war was the first time they were able to make their voices heard, even following the democratization of the country in 1994.

BACKGROUND

In November 1941, the South African forces lost almost the entire 5th South African Infantry Brigade during the Battle of Sidi Rezegh. On 21 and 22 November, 224 soldiers were killed, 379 wounded and 3000 men were captured.28 The country barely had time to recover from this tragedy when a second setback hit the South African forces, this time on a much larger scale. In June 1942, scarcely seven months after Sidi Rezegh, Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel’s cunning desert battle strategy led to the fall of Tobruk and a total of 33 000 Allied soldiers were captured, among them 10 722 South Africans.29 Following their capture, these men endured physical and psychological hardships and privations of all kinds. In order to survive, both mentally and physically, POWs employed unique coping mechanisms, ranging from anger and hostility towards their captors, complete withdrawal from their captive community, or seeking alliances with fellow POWs or even forming friendships with their captors. One of the outstanding factors that influenced South African POW experience from the outset was their almost universal admiration for Rommel. During an interview, David Brokensha remembered how Rommel achieved the status of a hero among the UDF soldiers, the same point of view is repeated in the memoirs of Ike Rosmarin and Alan Flederman, both of whom were also captured in North Africa.30 This admiration however, seemed to have been mutual to some extent, as there are many examples of POWs who recalled how the Germans admitted that they considered the South Africans, like themselves, to be good soldiers, but that the Italians were not, and therefore they felt obliged to apologise as they had orders to hand them over to their inferior allies.31 Apologies such as these were not limited to Tobruk, but also took place at Sidi Rezegh where Schwikkard was captured. He remembered how

Rommel pitched up in his armoured car and addressed us, saying “for you the war is over, I’m sorry but I need all my fighting men who know how to fight, to come to the front and help me fight this war. I’m sorry to tell you that you are now going to come under Italian sentry soldiers. And these are not soldiers they are rebels, so I’m sorry to do this to you.” and sure Rommel’s words were very very true.32

Almost all South African POWs who were captured at Sidi Rezegh or Tobruk followed more or less the same route during their captivity. From the temporary camps in North Africa, they were transported by ship to Italy, where the rank and file POWs were put to work, mostly as farm labourers. During this time,

27 David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.
30 David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek. I. Rosmarin, Inside Story (Cape Town: W.J. Flesch & Partners, 1999), v. A. Flederman, And Direction was given(Cape Town: Rothko International, 2005), xv.
31 David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.
896 South Africans escaped to Switzerland where they were able to wait in safety for the war to come to an end.\textsuperscript{33} When Mussolini’s rule finally came to an end in September 1943 following the coup d’état in July, thousands more escaped when their Italian guards deserted the camps.\textsuperscript{34} While many were successful in their bid for freedom, most were recaptured and transported to German occupied territories where they remained for the rest of the war.\textsuperscript{35}

During the interviews, most former POWs expressed surprise at the interest in their war-time experiences and admitted that they hardly ever shared their stories with their family or friends when they returned to South Africa after the war. Their silence was further exacerbated by the Nationalists who took power in 1948 and imposed the system of apartheid. Had the Nationalists been in power in 1939, South Africa would probably not have participated in the war.\textsuperscript{36} Furthermore, the fascist-like Government decided to end its support for veteran-societies such as the Memorable Order of the Tin Hats (MOTH), leaving war veterans without any support of any kind.\textsuperscript{37} Many veterans also believed that the Nationalist Government discriminated against those who volunteered for service under the Smuts Government.\textsuperscript{38} The negative attitude towards the National Party government was expressed by former POWs such as Fred Van Alphen Stahl and Michael de Listie. The only former POW interviewed for this project who did not view the victory of the NP government as a negative event, was an Afrikaans-speaking ex-policeman who felt that he had been deceived by the Smuts government into sighing the oath of service, which led to him going to war against his will.\textsuperscript{39}

**HISTORIOGRAPHY**

International disapproval of the apartheid system resulted in international historians marginalising South Africa’s role in the Allied war effort, and this had the perhaps unintended consequence of denying UDF veterans the opportunity to share their stories. Since apartheid ended in 1994, and with the increasing interest in POW history, international historians have become less concerned with South Africa’s prejudiced past, but because they view the war as an international conflict, their writing tends to focus less on individual national experience and more on inclusive subjects within POW history.\textsuperscript{40} Themes generally include issues such as treatment of prisoners by their captors, and aspects of the daily life of POWs such as camp entertainment and recreation. Nevertheless, the work of historians such as Bob Moore, Kent Fedorowich and Barbara Hately-Broad has contributed greatly towards making POW history more accessible. However, by not distinguishing between the different Commonwealth prisoners, referring merely to British or Commonwealth forces, creates difficulty in determining the unique experience of the South African POWs, as their specific political and social background was especially relevant and almost certainly influenced their experience of captivity as well as their relationships with their captors.\textsuperscript{41}

In South African the historiography on POW experience is skeletal, with Maxwell Leigh’s *Captives Courageous* the most apparent. This 1992 publication, although based on firsthand accounts such as...
memos and diaries, does not offer a critical analysis of POW experience as it does not investigate issues such as the effect of time on memory, retrospective knowledge or the likelihood of the accuracy or probability of the described events in any of the narratives. Other publications which include South African POW experience include Paul Schamberger’s *Interlude in Switzerland*, but in this case the focus is mainly on those POWs who escaped to Switzerland from Italy. Joel Mervis and John Keene’s publications on South Africa during World War Two both included chapters on POW experience, but in both cases the research was cursory and did not contribute much towards filling the knowledge gap regarding South African POW experience.

Due to the nature of the historiography and the post-war political situation in South Africa, the voice of the rank and file UDF soldier has to a large extent been lost. Considering the lack of public acknowledgement for their part in the war, it is perhaps not surprising that many POWs decided to remain silent. In an effort to make known their experience, this research was carried out to gain a more comprehensive picture of the events in POW camps where UDF soldiers were held during World War Two. In this regard, the oral history technique was used along with that of studying other first-hand materials, such as personal memoirs and diaries. Archival documents were also consulted and these were helpful in revealing the political, economic and bureaucratic aspects that influenced the lives of the POWs. Verifying oral recollections against archival evidence was not possible, except in one or two extraordinary cases. The oral interviews, therefore, formed the basis of the research. It stands to reason that this method holds implications for factual correctness, and in the following section the issue of accuracy and historical significance is addressed.

ACCURACY AND HINDSIGHT IN MEMOIRS AND ORAL RECOLLECTIONS

Oral testimony and memoirs both present difficulties regarding historical accuracy. The writing of one’s memoirs is a very personal act, but for those unskilled in writing methods, the conventions of writing often obstruct the proper expression of the actual and true past experience. Oral history on the other hand is influenced by a number of factors which all affect historical accuracy. The difference in age between an interviewee and interviewer may for example affect what and how the interviewee decides to share during the interview. Similarly, the different first languages of the researcher and the former POW may also influence how the interview fares. In a country such as South Africa where language was often tied to a person’s political viewpoints, this aspect is no small matter. During the interview process in 2010, for instance, an English speaking former POW noticed that the interviewer was not only much younger, but also Afrikaans-speaking. The ex-POW immediately started to explain that repeatedly stated that he had nothing against the Afrikaners and that he admired them for their role in the war. Valerie Yow furthermore advises that it is not only age that affects interviews, but also differences in gender, social class and ethnicity. As the researcher must be aware of his or her personal world view and social context and how he or she is affected by the interviewee’s expressions during the interview, empathy has shown to have a positive effect on the interview process. In the case of the former POWs, the researcher’s empathy towards the veterans certainly helped to create rapport.

In an effort to gain some sense of historical accuracy from the oral testimony and from the personal memoirs, these two primary sources were compared to each other. This method was possible in a few cases where the former POW who was interviewed had also written his memoirs. In all of these examples, the memoirs were written some years before the interviews were conducted. In general, POW memoirs seem to display a fairly balanced narrative of their war-time experience. In most cases the written

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42 P. Schamberger, *Interlude in Switzerland*.
46 The interviewer’s first language is Afrikaans.
48 Seven of the former POWs who were interviewed had also written memoirs. In total 12 POWs were interviewed and 19 memoirs were used for the initial research.
accounts of captivity included both positive and negative experiences and in many cases former POWs did not shy away from expressing their dismay, emotional turmoil or their fears regarding their situation. On the other hand, the oral interviews were to a large extent characterised by overly positive narratives, creating the idea that captivity in Europe was on the whole a pleasant experience enjoyed by most POWs.

Examples of negative accounts in memoirs include Cyril Crompton’s description of the ‘terrible’ food in Germany, that ‘whenever, driven by hunger, [he] tried to eat it, [but would] bring it straight up.’49 While an example of an especially positive experience was articulated in David Brokensha’s memoirs, who remembered his captivity in Italy, and the POWs regular swimming excursions in the Tiber river as follows: ‘Lovely carefree moments, these plunges in the Tiber are among the happier memories of my captivity.’50

On a more negative note, Brokensha recalled in his memoirs how, upon arriving in Germany, the POW registration process was so frightening to him that he fainted three times before he reached inoculation point. The experience of the Italian doctor who was ‘grey with fatigue [and who] wrestled to get the blunt needle’ into his arm left David with a life-long fear of needles.51

The interviews, however, were different. Most former POWs focussed primarily on positive aspects of their captivity. Many of their narratives are characterised by a tone of humour and even optimism, with accounts of POWs outwitting their captors, of friendships between captives and captors, and in some cases romantic relationships with German civilians. An anecdote from Brokensha’s interview illustrates the general tone that typified most other interviews. Brokensha remembered how he was part of a group of POWs who were on their way to work in Dresden when one of the POWs noticed a sign at a park which prohibited entry to Jews and dogs. The prisoner then immediately suggested to the German guards that they walk through the park and the suggestion was accepted. The guards were unaware that the POW was Jewish.52 Instead of a continuous narrative, the interviews were fragmented with anecdotes such as these that created the impression that camp life was in fact a series of humorous and interesting experiences.

Upon further analysis, the narratives of most former POWs also reveal a sense of resistance and aggression towards their captors, but for the most part examples of these emotions remained passive and the opposition towards the enemy hardly ever resulted in specific or blatant acts of resistance from the side of the captives. Examples of passive resistance towards the enemy included covert plans to deceive guards with the trading of food and other scarce commodities that POWs received through their Red Cross parcels. An example include the teabag racket in Camp 54 near Fara Sabina which entailed the POWs brewing teabags at least three times before the bags were carefully dried and repacked. Stanley Smollan remembered how they would throw [the tea] over the fence, a peculiar sight, we’d throw over a packet of tea and they’d send over a couple of loaves of bread and what they didn’t know was that the tea had been brewed to its last and dried out on the roof and repacked.53

In other instances POWs also believed that they could undermine enemy morale with their unique propaganda efforts. By conspicuously displaying their Red Cross parcels and the relative luxuries it brought, POWs felt that they were showing their captors that the Allies were winning the war as they were able to afford items that had become exceptionally scarce in enemy territory. In another example Matthys Beukes received a new pair of boots from the Red Cross while he was being held in Italy. When the sentries asked him if these were American boots, he pointed out that they were in fact South African, but rejects, as South African soldiers would not been seen walking around in such poor quality boots.54

49 C. Crompton & P. Johnson, Luck’s Favours Two South African Second World War Memoirs (Fish Hoek: Echoing Green Press, 2010), 64.
50 D. Brokensha, Brokie’s Way, an Anthropologist’s Story: Love and Work in Three Continents (Fish Hoek: Amani Press, 2007), 89.
52 David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.
54 Matthys Beukes interview: 2 February 2011, Bloemfontein.
Comparing memoirs with oral testimony to establish historical accuracy is very difficult, not least because these experiences were all of a very personal nature and the retelling or the writing down of these memories is the result of subjective interpretation. Fading memories no doubt also affected both memoirs and oral testimony, but as memoirs were generally written soon after the war it can be safely assumed that these are in general more accurate representations of what took place. Memory, however, is not the only factor for historical accuracy, as the former POWs were also influenced by retrospective knowledge on the war and on POW matters. This knowledge not only influenced their interpretation of events as communicated in their memoirs, it also influenced what they chose to share during interviews. Clive Luyt’s account on his escape from the Italian camp following the armistice is a good example of the way in which retrospective knowledge can influence oral testimony. Luyt’s version of his decision to leave the Italian camp before the Germans arrived to take control is as follows:

I went to my friend, [...] tall chap, you know you sort of form friendships and what have you and I said “Let’s get out of here” and we were told by our commanding officer “Don’t go out, you don’t know who is the fascist, who isn’t a fascist, who’s pro-Mussolini or against Mussolini and you can’t go wondering around the countryside you will just end up in trouble” and I said “Look I’m not worried about the fascist, I’m worried about the Germans, they fought the war in North Africa to catch guys like you and me” and I said “they’re not going to let us go, give them 24 hours and we will be in a train, cattle truck, and off to Germany” so he said “I think let’s get out”. And that’s the rest of the story.55

At the time of Luyt’s escape, he would not have known that POWs would be transferred to Germany by train or by cattle truck, in fact, the only way he could have known about the transfer of POWs to Germany was from sources which he consulted after the war. His final reference to the same incident included:

I said “give them 24 hours and they’ll be here” and I was right, almost to 24 hours. They came up with four tanks, put one tank at each corner of the, of the camp, on the outside of course, but with the guns and all pointing at us, but by that time [...] and I were out.56

The mere fact that Luyt’s escape was successful places doubt on his oral testimony. According to his memoirs, by the time 24 hours had passed, Luyt and his fellow escaper had already reached Marcellina, a town which is about 34 kilometres away from his POW camp near Fara Sabina.57

By far the most instances of escape among South African rank and file POWs followed the Italian armistice in September 1943. The South Africans were among the almost 50 000 Allied POWs who left their camps. In many cases the Italians also abandoned the camps and where they did not, POWs did not encounter much resistance from Italian guards when they decided to leave the camps and either make their way to Switzerland or to the Allied lines.58

It is important to note that examples of resistance against the enemy in officers’ camps were on the one hand of a much larger scale and on the other hand much better known in the public domain. Resistance against their captors most often took the form of escape attempts and while most officers and especially airmen believed they had a duty to escape.59 Of the most well-known of these escape narratives includes the book by Paul Brickhill, The Great Escape, which later formed the basis of a film.60 Rank and file POWs took a different view on escape, often consciously deciding to remain in captivity, but nevertheless

56 Clive Luyt interview: 19 May 2010, Cape Town.
discussing escape plans as a means to relieve many hours of boredom. In their oral testimony, many rank and file POWs recalled examples of fellow POWs who attempted to escape, but very few could relate how they themselves attempted to escape. Many POWs felt that their inability to speak German, their empty stomachs, or the destruction of the surrounding countryside prevented them from putting their talk of escape into action. In other cases, the shared knowledge between German camp commandants and POWs about the imminent end of the war resulted in agreements against escape between captives and captors, as was the case in Dresden where a specific agreement was made between the German camp commander and the POW camp leader, Paul Brokensha.

In some cases the mutual respect between South Africans and Germans as worthy enemies resurfaced as Camp commandants expressed their admiration towards those who attempted escape, as escape was seen as the duty of POWs. One such example was recalled by Schwikkard in a camp near Breslau where an escape tunnel was discovered. Following a heated discussion between the camp commandant and the guilty POWs, the commandant admonished the German sentries by saying that it took a vervloekte [accursed] Englander to tell me how a soldier should behave, of course he should try and escape, no I can see now, you are good.

The issue of escape and the different ways in which this matter was handled in memoirs and during oral interviews, illustrates to some extent how retrospective knowledge and hindsight influenced the men. The best example is from David Brokensha’s recollections of his time in the Dresden Work Camp. In his memoirs, Brokensha recalled his desire to escape as follows:

We knew that it is a prisoner’s duty to try to escape [...] Jake and I [...] thought that we might hide in a wagon which was heading a long way west, arranging for our companions to cover for us, and then let ourselves out as near to the destination as possible. We believed that we could easily find civilian clothes among the sack in the wagon, but I now admit that this was a harebrained scheme, unlikely to succeed – particularly with our limited German. But it caught our youthful imaginations and appealed to our impatient natures. (my emphasis)

When Brokensha wrote his memoirs, he acknowledged that their ideas of escape were unrealistic and the result of their rebellion against captivity. During his interview, however, Brokensha again dismissed their war-time ideas of escape, recounting that

Horst [camp commandant] asked Paul [Brokensha] to try and dissuade us from making attempts to escape, we were right in Dresden it was near the eastern frontier. None of us had adequate German, I spoke some but I couldn’t have passed anyway for a German, we would have had to get clothes and there wasn’t a very realistic chance.

In this case, David Brokensha dismissed the idea of escape not merely because of their own shortcomings, i.e. German language and clothes, but mainly because the camp commander and the camp leader agreed between them that POWs should not escape. In this way, Brokensha justified his inability or reluctance to escape not a result of his personal choice, but a consequence of decisions in which he had no participation.

Accuracy can, regardless of hindsight, retrospective knowledge and changing perceptions about their experiences, be influenced simply by the conventions of writing, especially if the writer is not competent or experienced. While the intention of the author may be to truthfully put his memories to paper, his use of language may impede the proper expression of the actual and true past experience. Recalling during the

64 Bernard Schwikkard interview: 17 March 2010, Johannesburg.
66 David Brokensha interview: 10 September 2010, Fish Hoek.
interview his last days as a POW, Schwikkard’s recollections was characterised by informal language, such as

[I told the doctor] now that you have come with your whole medical outfit I’m handing over to you what little I’ve got because I’m now going to escape. So he said “you can’t do that, I’ll have you court-martialled”, and I said “doctor you can have me court-martialled, I’m sorry I believe I’ve done my bit, I am not qualified for this job, rightly or wrongly I am now deciding to save my own skin, they really don’t need me, you are here and you have all the tools and cheerio...” [my emphasis]  

In his memoirs, Schwikkard described the same incident by using formal language almost reminiscent of military bureaucracy:

He [American doctor] insisted that I did not leave, threatening me with court-martial if I disobeyed. I informed him that I was under no further obligation to the men as I was not an official medical orderly. I also reminded him that I was not subject to his orders. As far as I was concerned I had done my share and it was now time for him to do his. I felt that I should be allowed to exercise my right as a POW to escape.  

While the facts of the incident that Schwikkard describes remains largely intact, the tone – a result of the use of language – creates a vastly different impression of the circumstances surrounding the event as well as of Schwikkard’s attitude towards the event.

QUESTIONS OF SIGNIFICANCE
Taking the all of these examples into consideration it becomes clear that historical accuracy in oral history is very difficult to determine. Even when it is possible to compare oral recollections to written memoirs, establishing historical accuracy remains difficult, if not impossible. Considering first of all that South African POW experience is a largely neglected theme in South Africa’s historiography, and secondly that the sources are not only unreliable but also very scarce, should any further efforts be made to research this theme? Furthermore, if we accept that historical accuracy is an elusive beast at best, how then can the oral history narratives of these former POWs contribute towards historical significance? Why include a soldier’s version of events if we acknowledge that his story is punctured with inaccuracies that may lead the historian to a labyrinth of legend and myth?

When, at the start of each interview the former rank and file POWs expressed a great desire to tell their stories with the only caveat that the interviewer should understand that they were not heroes, the veterans were perhaps subconsciously referring to their lack of initiative to actively resist their captors. Compared to the available reading material on the heroic escape stories that they no doubt had access to since their liberation, these men must have felt their accounts were far less daring than those officers and airmen who bravely faced the dangers of escape. On the other hand, the rank and file POWs’ over-emphasis of the positive aspects of their captivity may have been a subconscious attempt to illustrate to the researcher that despite their uncritical acceptance of captivity, they nevertheless remained in control of their circumstances and even managed to outwit their captors with for example food trading schemes that benefitted POWs and harmed the enemy, albeit on a such a minute scale that it was almost entirely insignificant in relation to the war. Whatever the reason for the former POWs stipulations regarding heroism or the importance they place on their positive attitudes towards captivity, both cases illustrate that they experience lack of confidence about their POW experience on some level. Their timidity may well be the result of years of silence, self-inflicted or externally imposed by the nationalist Government or by historians who looked towards easier accessible themes.

68 B.E. Schwikkard, My life briefly told (Unpublished memoirs, 1999), 45.
CONCLUSION

In South Africa, the historiographical overemphasis on one or two specific themes leaves the full story of the country’s history as yet untold. The South African participation in World War I and World War II has received attention from historians; their work does not include POW experience. In 1940, Smuts established the *The Union War Histories*, in an effort to make public the country’s role in the war, however, these publications were abruptly cut short after the war, leaving the historiography with a considerable dearth of knowledge. While many historians would welcome a new subject area to investigate, the mainly statistical nature of the archival material compels one to look towards oral history to bring humanity to POW history. By limiting research to archival data, there would be no POW experience, simply POW facts and figures.

When the initial interviews were conducted in 2010, the youngest interviewee was 86 and the oldest 97. During the following year, three of the former POWs who participated in the research passed away. Furthermore, the number of former POWs who could be found and who were willing to participate was very few and by no means representative of the number captured during the war. The dwindling numbers of former POWs makes it all the more poignant that all of those interviewed expressed great appreciation that someone was interested in what had happened to them during the war. While some of these men who shared parts of their stories with friends and family, others wrote memoirs which remained largely unpublished. The fact remains, however, that many former POWs were never able share their experiences, leaving their voices excluded from the broader historiography.

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I can prove you I’m a virgin’: Women’s memories of sexual humor in Finnish factories during the Second World War.

Kirsi-Maria Hytönen
(Finland):

Resumen: “Yo te puedo demostrar que soy virgen.” Los recuerdos de las mujeres sobre humor sexual en fábricas finlandesas durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial

Durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial la mayoría de hombres jóvenes estuvieron en el frente, y las mujeres se ocuparon en los diferentes campos de industria también en Finlandia. Cantidad de mano de obra maleducado, por ejemplo las estudiantes femeninas, se contrataron para trabajar en las fábricas. El porcentaje de mujeres trabajando para la industria se aumentó; en 1942 c. 50 por ciento de los obreros eran mujeres.

En mi trabajo estaré investigando los relaciones de poder en las fábricas el lado de humor sexual, desde el punto de vista de las mujeres. En la material para investigación, el conflicto de poder esta frecuentemente expresado con humor sexual. En mi trabajo, el humor sexual es una herramienta para negociar, probar y indicar las relaciones de poder en el lugar de trabajo. Además de género, también la edad era un atributo significativo en las relaciones sociales entre los trabajadores. El humor sexual no era una prueba solamente para las mujeres, pero también para los trabajadores nuevos.

Este trabajo esta basado en mi disertación doctoral sobre los recuerdos de mujeres de su trabajo durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial y la época de reconstrucción en Finlandia.

Abstract: During the Second World War women’s position in the labour market changed also in Finland. Because most of the young men were on the front, women were needed more also in the different fields of industry. Some women had to perform “men’s jobs”, i.e. jobs that required more education or experience, and were sometimes paid better. In addition, lots of uneducated work force, e.g. school girls, was recruited in to the factories. Percentage of women working in the industry increased; in 1942, c. 50 per cent of industrial workers was female.

In my paper I will examine the power relations in factories in a light of sexual humour. I focus on women’s memory narratives during the Second World War in Finland. Even though everyone worked together for the same goal during the War, conflicts occurred. In the research material, the power conflict between men and women is often expressed with sexual humour. In my paper, sexual humour is a tool to negotiate, test and indicate power relations at the workplace.

Power relations between factory workers were not argued only between men and women, but also renegotiated every time when new group of workers were recruited. In addition to gender, also age was significant attribute in the social relations between workers. Sexual humour was not a test only for women, but also for new workers.

From the viewpoint of gender, my study is imbalanced, because the material is produced only by women. However, subjectivity of the material is one of the key points in the oral
history. The material tells about personal experiences and ways to adjust to the rough and dirty talk.

The paper is based on my ethnological doctoral dissertation on women’s memories of paid work during the Second World War and time of reconstruction in Finland.
It’s because we’re just women’: Female reflections of the self in the workplace during the Second World War.

Daniel Swan
(UK):

Resumen: “Es porque solo somos mujeres”; Reflexiones femeninas del yo en el lugar de trabajo durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial

James Hinton (2002) señala que el discurso sobre la guerra, el cambio social, y las relaciones de género ha inclinado cada vez más hacia conclusiones negativas. Este trabajo busca un enfoque revisado con el argumento de que, si bien la Segunda Guerra Mundial no transformó dramáticamente la condición social de las mujeres trabajadoras, a nivel personal que puede ser considerado como una experiencia liberadora. He entrevistado a 44 mujeres, quienes trabajaron durante la guerra de Portsmouth y la Isla de Wight (sur de Inglaterra). Esta investigación proporcionará una interpretación más matizada de la subjetividad femenina y discurso de género mediante la colocación de un estudio de caso local en un marco más amplio para evaluar las experiencias de las mujeres en Gran Bretaña. Reflexiones de trabajo Mis entrevistados destacan algunos de los resultados positivos que la vida laboral de las mujeres en forma de construcciones de sus identidades y capacidades percibidas. La capacitación de las mujeres en tiempos de guerra, se evaluará la división del trabajo y las condiciones laborales en el lugar de trabajo. Esta investigación sigue la afirmación de Anna Green (2012) con respecto a la capacidad de “agencia humana activa”, mediante el cual las personas pueden reflexionar sobre sus vidas. Expresiones de su identidad como trabajadores de guerra Mis entrevistados pueden presentarse en parte como pasiva y sumisa al estado de guerra y los empleadores. Implicitamente narrativas femeninas caracterizan la posición de las mujeres que trabajan como marginales e inferior. Las mujeres entraron generalmente en trabajos de guerra con menos cualificaciones y competencias que de trabajadores y aceptaron su condición inferior que hace el trabajo de las mujeres “no calificada”. Sin embargo, las lecturas matizadas de testimonios femeninos revelan los intentos de desafiar la autoridad de los empresarios a mejorar sus circunstancias, la existencia de decisiones autónomas y deseos, y fuerza para trabalzar en condiciones de prueba. Mis entrevistados han demostrado que su trabajo de guerra era un momento determinado de sus vidas. Por lo tanto, diferentes experiencias y creencias requieren análisis para comprender la memoria personal y narrativas de los trabajadores en tiempos de guerra individuales.

Abstract: James Hinton (2002) notes that discourse on war, social change, and gender relations has leant increasingly towards negative conclusions. This paper seeks a revised approach by arguing that whilst the Second World War did not dramatically transform the social status of women workers, at a personal level it can be regarded as being a liberating experience. I have interviewed 44 women, who worked during the war in Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight (in the south of England). This research will provide a more nuanced interpretation of female subjectivity and gender discourse by placing a local case study into a broader framework to assess the women’s experiences in Britain. My interviewees’ reflections of work highlight some positive outcomes that women’s working lives shaped constructions of their identities and perceived abilities. Women’s Wartime training, the division of labour
and the working conditions in the workplace will be assessed.

This research follows Anna Green’s assertion (2012) regarding the capacity of “active human agency”, whereby individuals can reflect upon their lives. My interviewees’ expressions of their identity as war workers can present themselves partially as passive and submissive to the wartime state and employers. Implicitly, female narratives characterise the position of working women as marginal and inferior. Women generally entered into war work with fewer qualifications and skills than male workers and accepted their lower status doing ‘unskilled’ women’s work. However, nuanced readings of female testimonies reveal attempts to challenge the authority of employers to improve their circumstances, the existence of autonomous decisions and desires, and strength to work under testing circumstances. My interviewees have shown that their war work was a defined moment of their lives. Therefore, different experiences and beliefs require analysis to understand personal memory and narratives of individual wartime workers.
INTRODUCTION
This paper will argue that whilst the Second World War did not dramatically transform the social status of women workers, at a personal level it can be regarded as being a liberating experience. This research will provide a more nuanced interpretation of female subjectivity and gender discourse by placing a local case study - Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight [in the south of England] into a broader framework to assess the women’s experiences in Britain. My interviewees’ reflections of work highlight some positive outcomes that women’s working lives shaped constructions of their identities and perceived abilities. Anna Greens’ assertion regarding the value and capacity of “active human agency” will be followed, whereby individuals are able to reflect upon their pasts.71

My interviewees’ expressions of their identity as war workers present themselves partially as passive and submissive to the wartime state and employers. Implicitly female narratives characterise the position of working women as marginal and inferior. Women generally entered into war work with fewer qualifications and skills than male workers and accepted their lower status doing ‘unskilled’ work. However, nuanced readings of female testimonies reveal attempts to challenge the authority of employers to improve their circumstances, the existence of autonomous decisions and desires, and strength to work under testing circumstances. My interviewees have shown that their war work was a defined moment of their lives. Therefore different experiences and beliefs require analysis to understand personal memory and narratives of individual wartime workers. Women’s Wartime training, the division of labour and the working conditions in the workplace will be assessed.

WARTIME TRAINING
From the interviews I have conducted, women’s wartime training reveals a variety of experiences. For some women, the opportunity to develop new skills and preparation for war work was enriching and exciting.72 For others, notably in the industrial sector, their training prepared them to be in an inferior position at work, and their work was regarded as less skilled than ‘men’s work’. Some narratives indicate that the training offered to women was either inadequate or inconsistent, further strengthening the idea that women’s work was unskilled and therefore did not warrant comprehensive training.73

Testimonies of female farm labourers show that their training for the Women’s Land Army was not comprehensive and was conducted in an inconsistent and impromptu manner. Their testimonies emphasise their unskilled status and can be interpreted as presenting their role in the war effort as unimportant. Despite being unfamiliar with farm work, Margery was not offered any formal training to prepare her for the Women’s Land Army.74 Josie was also not offered any training, she suggests this was because her work was unskilled:

No, not us lot anyway... No, we were just told what to do and – you don’t need a lot of training for picking up potatoes... or picking tomatoes.75

Elsie worked in dairies and was offered very basic training in Newport to work on dairy farms on the Isle of Wight:

Yes that’s very funny... no in the... recruiting office which they moved from Pile Street to Bronston House in Lugley Street they had an artificial cow which [laughs] which was just err a cow’s udder bag filled up with milky water and you had to sit there and you had to learn to milk on that and that was your first experience of milking a cow [laughs] and then and then they thought they’d thrown you in at the deep end so that was it yes.76

72 Interview with Grace, 10 November 2011; Interview with Joy Y, 6 January 2012.
73 Interview with Josie M, 11 August 2011; Interview with Elsie, 1 August 2012.
74 Interview with Margery, 26 June 2012.
75 Interview with Josie, 11 August 2011.
76 Interview with Elsie, 1 August 2012.
At the dairy farms, when asked if anyone showed her what to do Elsie said she was told what to do and left to get on with her work as it was not difficult.77

Grace recalled that during her training the farmers tried to pay them inadequate wages:

They, they were hoping I think that we would work for less money for the first month where it would be training and we rather jibbed at that and I think they saw the folly of that and we, we just got the same wage so we were paid for training if you like.78

Joy’s nursing training comprised long “interesting” days involving observation and practising required skills.79

Making beds, how to dress wounds. We had two Frenchmen in from Dieppe I think, they had crushed arms and we had to stand by and watch the Sister, ‘now you do it’ she’d say ‘now you do it’ and they let us do lots of things that the girls today wouldn’t do and nursing certainly wouldn’t do but yeah we were thrown straight into it. I really loved every minute, I wanted to see everything you know.80

This testimony reveals Joy’s enthusiasm for nursing and her desire to learn. Her narrative showed a passionate recollection whereby the war offered her the opportunity to train for something and gain skills in work she clearly gained a lot from. Joy’s positive and enthusiastic recollection of her nursing training in a traditionally feminine profession contrasts with that of Norra, working in a more traditionally masculine sphere of employment – engineering.

Norra completed her training to be an electrical fitter at the Portsmouth Dockyard in about two months, whereas male electrical fitters took five years to train on an apprenticeship.81 Norra felt that her training was not to the same standard as the male workers:

I don’t think that that was long enough you know the men or the boys they went to school, they went to evening classes err, they did homework and all things like that. Well I never did any of that, and I couldn’t see why they said you’re a fitter cos they were boys from college there. No, that’s a disappointment for me.82

Norra was clearly disappointed with the training offered to her. Wartime constraints and her gender meant she could not be trained to the same standard as male electrical fitters. Her sense of a gender difference indicates that in her opinion there was a difference between men’s and women’s work. Thus her narrative highlights’ training was conducted along patriarchal lines. Testimonies of women in the Land Army emphasises their unskilled and compliant position as farm labourers, consistently their narratives devalue their role with the exception of Grace. She recognised in her reflection of her wartime experiences that her role as a farm labourer was important and worthy of payment, this was why she decided to challenge the decision to underpay her and the others for their training. Joy’s testimony of her training focuses on her enthusiasm for nursing, which as a traditionally and acceptably ‘feminine’ pursuit, gender discourse does not seem to be relevant.

77 Interview with Elsie, 1 August 2012. Grace D, from the Isle of Wight, said her training was neither comprehensive nor extensive.
78 Interview with Grace D, 8 August 2012.
79 Interview with Joy Y, 6 January 2012.
80 Interview with Joy Y, 6 January 2012.
81 Interview with Norra, 31 October 2012. Lunn and Day notes that after the First World War apprenticeships lasted five years. Refer to: Lunn and Day (eds.), Inside the Wall, p. 5.
82 Interview with Norra, 31 October 2012.
DIVISION OF LABOUR

Dominant discourse analyzing women’s position in the workplace focuses on the omnipresence of patriarchy. The focus of historiography assesses female workers as being inferior, temporary and less skilled than male workers. Such interpretations are valid and appear to reflect the reality for most of my interviewees working during the war in Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight. The most consistent view expressed from the interviewees was their war work was distinct from that of men rather than reflecting that they were unequal to male workers. This reveals that at a local level, as it was at across Britain, war work was likely to be conducted across gender lines.

Gender segregation was most apparent within the industrial sector. Whilst women were doing ‘men’s work’, they were on lower pay rates than men and were only supervised by men. Women’s work was deskilled and conformed to perceived gender stereotypes, whereby women were not doing jobs which required qualifications and training or physical strength, but instead were performing monotonous and routine work which required precision. Aside from the clear gender bias operating within industrial work, female narratives reveal that women played an important role in wartime factories, they were capable and efficient workers and they successfully adapted to working in a predominantly ‘masculine environment’.

Peggy F, a pontoon manufacturer at the Raneleigh Yacht Yard in Lake on the Isle of Wight described herself as a semi-skilled worker who was not “quite” equal to or as capable as the male workers: “no, I mean they were doing heavier work, putting the big bollards on that, you know. No, no, I wouldn’t say I was as good as a man, no way”. Maureen, a wire splicer at the Portsmouth dockyard, presents a different view. She regarded the war as removing gender barriers at work. Maureen said that the war was the “beginning of the merging, that conscript thing”. This viewpoint is understandable as Maureen would have been working alongside women and men.

Norra, worked on an electrical bench, cleaning and working with armatures in the Portsmouth dockyard, described her work as disappointing, she clearly wanted to help with the war effort but her labour was curtailed as she was seen to be too efficient:

I wanted to get on and do something but the boss there said slow down, slow down! So I said to him I want to, you know I want to do something, so he said well if you do that he said we won’t have any work to do. So he was on his own side, so that is why I wanted to do something for the war effort.

Norra’s frustration provides an indication of the division of labour within the Portsmouth dockyard and a desire by male employees to maintain the patriarchal order of male supremacy. Norra, was a keen and enthusiastic worker, but her ‘boss’, did not want her to work too quickly as this could mean there might not enough work for the male workers, or it would show the capability of the female workforce, which

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84 Interview with Pricilla Morris, 9 August 2011; Pat Stagg, 16 August 2011; Grace Davison, 10 November 2011; Kathleen Mallard, 5 March 2012.


87 Interview with Peggy F, 17 October 2012.

88 Interview with Maureen, 7 December 2011.

89 Interview with Norra, 31 October 2012.
would pose a risk to men’s jobs and wage rates. Such connotations would interrupt the division of labour and risk humiliating the male workforce.

Norra was unable to do work to reflect her capabilities in the dockyard. Her initial enthusiasm to work was dampened by the ostensibly restrictive role women were placed in at the dockyard. Norra devalues her role, her disappointment is clear by the lack of opportunities open to her:

I don’t think what I learnt in the dockyard was any good, really. I mean if I wasn’t there, the work would just be done. I wanted some how to get in there and do something!

Similar to this, Kathleen describes her role as a veneer inspector at Saro Laminated Wood Products, East Cowes as not being a skilled occupation:

Not really, no. I think anyone could do it if someone showed them what to do, and explained to them what they were looking for [chuckles]... They said 'You come and be an inspector' so we just did it. They showed you what to do and we just did it.

These statements are fascinating as they reveal awareness from Norra and Kathleen that the work they were doing was unskilled and could be performed by anyone. Kathleen remembers her younger wartime self as being submissive and complying with the command to become a veneer inspector, whereas Norra can be regarded as more assertive by stating she wanted to take on work that was more challenging or to do more than she was being allowed to. Norra’s repetition that she “wanted to do something” emphasised her frustration and disappointment with her work.

Distinctions were also apparent in the existence of a physical gender divide between areas for male workers and female workers. Peggy W a canteen worker at Saunders Roe aircraft manufacturers on the Isle of Wight indicated that her work was separate from the men working on the aircraft. When asked if she was shown around the factory she stated:

No, no, no. Not really we just took up, over their cup of tea at 11 o’ clock and 3 o’clock and they could buy buns if they wanted to, cake whatever. No they didn’t show us a lot, wouldn’t be right really would it? I mean you’d be trespassing on their, whatever wouldn’t you? You know, you wouldn’t want to know too much about it would you? Not really would you?

The term “trespassing” is revealing, from Peggy W’s perspective canteen workers were not welcome outside of their domain nor would they want to wonder around the factory floor. By stating “us lot” - the canteen workers, Peggy W strengthens the notion that internal divisions existed and a divided factory culture was visible, where the male workers would enter the canteen at lunch and canteen workers could leave the kitchen and enter the factory in a serving capacity. This separation was possibly for practical safety reasons to reduce the risk of accidents but consideration should also be given to Peggy W’s assessment whereby she highlighted the physical separation of factory and canteen workers. Peggy accepted there was a division of labour at Saunders Roe and she did not feel inclined to disrupt this.

Dorothy worked in the tracings office at Samuel Whites boat builders, in Cowes on the Isle of Wight expressed most clearly an awareness of her own unequal position in the workplace and indicated that women did not have the same rights as men. Unlike most of the other interviewees Dorothy directly questioned her pay rate and by doing so challenged male authority, independently of a trade union:

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91 Lucy Noakes argues there was a need to maintain gender distinctions to minimise the social upheaval of total war. Refer to: Lucy Noakes, War and the British; gender, memory and national identity, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), p. 51.
92 Interview with Norra, 31 October 2012.
93 Interview with Kathleen, 5 March 2012.
94 Interview with Margaret W, 24 August 2011.
The union was supposed to get us a rise when we needed it, but they didn’t... I felt very disappointed because I thought it’s because we’re just women but I used to have the feeling that you know men had far more advantage in this life...which they certainly did for wages. Women could do the same work as men and have only half as much money and that’s not fair.95

Reflections of women’s identities as war workers shows clearly that in the industrial sector at a local level war work was conducted across gender lines, in terms of space where women worked, the work women could do, but also the lack of assistance offered from Trade Unions. Dorothy recollected most clearly that as a woman she was not paid the same rate as men and Norra implicitly recalled that as a woman she could not do the work she felt she was capable of doing. Despite consistent recollections of women being less skilled than men and in inferior positions, these testimonies also show that women were not totally submissive, they did challenge their positions and pay, and were capable of doing ‘men’s work’. It is also important to remember as highlighted by Maureen that war heralded the merging of men’s and women’s work. Thus as noted by Don Ritchie the interview for older people heralds the sorting of feelings, both successes and failures.96

WORKING CONDITIONS

Female reflections of the working environment shows that in some cases the industrial workplace was adapted for women workers, but also women would be working in severe conditions similar to male workers. Male colleagues in wartime industries have generally been remembered as respectful and caring, thus the treatment of female workers can be assessed as being paternal and possibly patriarchal. Women working in industries were seen as different to male workers. Thus in some areas the workplace was adapted and men’s behaviour was potentially modified to look after the women workers.

This section will focus upon Maureen, a wire splicer. Her testimony recalls vividly the changes that took place at the Portsmouth dockyard for the female workers and the conditions women worked in. Maureen recalled that Nissen huts were built for the female workforce for lunchtime at the dockyard, whereas the men did not have any built for them, they ate “on the job”. Maureen felt the women workers were “treated much better”. 97 Conditions at the dockyard were modified and improved to facilitate a female workforce. Whilst such additions to the dockyard were beneficial to female workers, it reflects a strengthening of the gender divide in the workplace. Presumably it was acceptable for male workers to eat their lunch anywhere, but women needed a designated and separate area. 98 Maureen extends her assessment of changes in the dockyard by assessing her male colleagues within a paternal framework and as welcoming and friendly:

They were very kind, the men, they were all much older obviously and they were like more or less father figures, most of them... were men that obviously had daughters and wives because they were very kind... and they helped you and more or less looked after you really.99

From Maureen’s perspective the respectful treatment from the male workers, based upon patriarchal and paternal assumptions and the Nissen huts for women to eat their lunch in eased her into the working environment. This information can be interpreted as a familial place and partially as a domesticated space. This contrasts with the physical working environment in the shipyard which Maureen described as:

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95 Interview with Dorothy Briggs, 29 February 2012.
97 Interview with Maureen, 7 December 2011.
98 The employment of women in ’male industries’ during the war highlighted a need for welfare provision at work, officials at the Ministry of Labour hoped this would attract women into industrial work and reduce absentee rates and industrial action by providing a minimum standard of welfare. Refer to: Sheila Lewenhak, Women and the Trade Unions An Outline History of Women in the British Trade Union Movement, [London: Ernest Bevin, 1977], pp. 239-241; Murphy, From Crinoline to Boilersuit , p. 87; Roberts, Women’s War Work , pp. 88-90.
99 Interview with Maureen, 7 December 2011.
Pretty grim because we were up on scaffolding with no safety nets. There was just no Health and Safety precautions at all, and of course there were lots of riveting, drilling and they were metal, hollow boats which you wouldn’t obviously do today. There were no ear silencers, there was just nothing at all... It was quite severe.100

Maureen also recalled the “freezing” conditions working outside on boats in all weather.101 Therefore the dockyard was not totally adapted for the female workforce. Women would be expected to perform their duties in the same way as men, with little care for their safety and in any weather conditions.

Similarly, Annie remembers working at Saunders Roe Aircraft Manufacturers as being cold in the winter:

Bloomin’ cold, freezing in the winter we had no heat... They sent us home once because our hair was white with frost, you wouldn’t believe that would you but that’s true... it was cold it was very cold you had big hanger doors open all the time, no heating there’s no central heating in those places. They were only aircraft hangers.102

Annie’s method for coping with the cold was to wear another layer of clothing. Annie realised she had a wartime job to do, and had to get on and do it, not only for her sake but she had a son (under the age of five) to support.103 Penny Summerfield has interpreted such narratives as “passive” and “fatalistic”, whereby women stoically “put up with things”.104

CONCLUSION

Oral testimonies reflect the complexity and varied experiences of women in the work place. While some historians have focused upon women’s unequal place at work, and have regarded any sense of liberation to be minimal and almost non-existent, oral narratives provide a different angle to view women’s own positions at work as varied compared to men. Oral narratives reveal that subjective experiences are important to analyse key issues such as patriarchy, equality, and identity. Thus as noted by Lynn Abrams, analysis of the self, is both the study of subjectivity and culture and the relationship between these areas.105 Listening to women’s experiences of their war work shows their decisions, desires and capabilities. Therefore using Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight as a case study to assess women working on the Home Front in Britain and their identities as war workers, highlights the flexibility, complexity and nuances of gender roles and gender divides and, also that women identified with and remember their working lives differently. Whilst the women workers were not equal to male workers, their pay and access to skilled work, what has become clear is that despite potential and actual difficulties for many women their working lives during the war was a defined moment in their lives and shaped constructions of their sense of self.

100 Interview with Maureen, 7 December 2011.
101 Interview with Maureen, 7 December 2011.
102 Interview with Annie, 6 September 2012.
103 Interview with Annie, 6 September 2012.
104 Summerfield, Reconstructing Women’s Wartime Lives, p. 99. Summerfield focuses on two key narratives: ‘Heroes’, whose testimonies reflect the important ‘heroic’ role of the individual in traditionally masculine spheres of employment and ‘stoics’ who were more likely to submit to ‘authoritarian’ parents or state direction into more typically feminine jobs. Refer to Chapter 3, ‘Heroes’ and ‘stoics’: war work and feminine identity, pp. 77 – 113.
105 Lynn Abrams, Oral History Reader, (London: Routledge, 2010); p. 34