

Oral History: A Method of Historical Research

At one time or another every historian, I believe, has wished she or he could sit down to interview the subject of their research or the participants in the event they are researching. Ask them questions about why they made the decisions they did, what they were thinking when they wrote what they wrote, how they felt when they participated in the things they did and whether or not they knew what they were doing. The attraction of oral history as a method of historical research is that the historian is allowed to do just that – interview the subject they are researching or participants in the events they wish to study. The claim for the oral history method is that the historical record is more immediate, the person is more clearly revealed than in a written text. This method of historical research has grown tremendously since the end of WW II.

In preparing for this lecture on introducing the historical research method of oral history I decided to do a computer search on the internet. I entered a database for journal articles and quickly discovered that this database had 488 articles on oral history. Before fainting I decided to skim the entries and there I discovered databases are interesting creatures when one is not able to precisely define one's terms. All the articles were on oral history. However, the ones in journals of medicine for dentists giving the history of different diseases of the mouth or newly discovered treatments for these diseases were not of interest to me. Journals for anthropologists had interesting articles but they were primarily about the history of pre-literate people as found in their oral tradition passed from one generation to the next. Most, close to 400, of the articles were about oral history, interviewing participants in historical events, the method of historical research that is of interest to this group.

How do historians define oral history? It is using the method of interviewing participants in events in order to collect their memories, understandings, interpretations of what occurred. The texts for the oral historian to analyze and interpret are those human beings still living who were present during the time period under study. As with all historians, the oral historian cannot recreate the past. However, the oral historian collects the memories of the past from people who are still alive to be questioned in an effort to expand the understanding of what actually happened.

Journalists interview participants in events as well. In fact, journalist interviews can become part of an oral history archive. However, journalists tend to interview people at the time of the event. They focus on getting an immediate reaction. Historians tend to interview people after the passage of time. In the

reminiscences gathered in the interview process the historian is dealing with memories that are not immediate reactions, but reflections on what has happened. What oral historians have learned, though, is that these collections of memories add insight to other historical materials in helping all of us gain understanding about the past and how it contributed to where we are today.

Oral history as a specific research discipline in the United States is dated from 1947 when Allan Nevins at Columbia University in New York City decided that preserving the recollections of older residents of cities in the Northeast would enhance his writing the history of these cities. Today Columbia University can still claim the largest collection of oral history tapes and transcripts. Baylor University in Waco, TX and the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) compete for second largest collection. Baylor University is a Baptist university and I am deeply indebted to their Oral History Institute and Dr. William Pitts for much of the information I will share with you today. In the United States university research centers are still the primary locations for oral history departments and archives. Now every President of the US establishes a presidential library and these also include oral history work¹. I know from the work an IBTS (International Baptist Theological Seminary, Prag) student did that the British Museum has an oral history section. One can generally count on finding oral history archives in the major research centers around the world, at least in the English-speaking world.

The topics for oral history are numerous. In Baylor University's collection alone one can find the following categories of projects: rural life; economic, business and judicial histories; central Texas history; refugee history; civil disobedience of Texas churches participating in the Sanctuary Movement; and a plethora of religion projects – Baptist Convention of Texas, missionaries, urban church ministries, denominational studies on Baptists, Catholics and Methodists, youth revival movement early in the 20th century, fundamentalism, politics in Baptist life, Baptist leaders, and why churches do not die in rural Texas².

A quick survey of the literature revealed studies on the Holocaust, which will only increase given current events about Swiss bank accounts and demands for compensation, as well as studies of various Jewish communities. Another theme of oral history projects is the attempt to capture the life of disappearing cultures like Native American, Appalachian Mountain, and the Australian aborigines. In the United States an entire collection called the 'Foxfire' books were devoted to preserving the recipes, sayings, stories, pictures, religious beliefs and practices of mountain culture once it began to dissipate as people moved out of the mountains

1 My notes from the lecture delivered by Dr. William Pitts, 23 June 1996, Oral History Workshop held at IBTS, 23-25 June 1996.

2 Ibid.

in order to find work at the end of World War II. Many studies were devoted to preserving the memories of slaves as well as various African American communities in the US. Additional popular topics are the Great Depression and WW II. Oral history is not confined to great themes and world-shattering events, though. Local communities use oral history to preserve their own history as do regions, like central Texas, for example. Furthermore local church congregations use oral history in writing their histories. Baptists in the US are great practitioners of this – at least they are the ones with whom I am most familiar. Every congregation it seems has its 50th, 75th 100th, 150th and so on anniversary history. Increasingly oral history is used to enhance the understanding of a church's life and mission in the community it serves.

Oral history projects serve an important purpose in providing the data which helps us remember those who were once left out of official histories. For example, local church histories used to be organized around pastors and building projects. With oral history projects the church's history now includes the memories of lay people, children, members of the community who lived during the time of the pastors and building projects³. Especially when there has been a trauma like a fire, church split, relocation, or change in the community it is so valuable to have the recollections of as many people as possible to understand how a congregation dealt with these events.

On a more global scale oral history studies write back into history those who have been ignored, deemed unimportant, or repressed in other historical studies such as women, racial minorities, religious minority groups, political minorities, the economically deprived. Today more than ever before we can know that „the victims of history are also the *makers* of history“⁴ and understand their participation in creating the past. Remembering both the victims and the victors of history is necessary for a more complete understanding of the past especially in terms of structures of dominance. Milan Kundera, Czech novelist, once wrote, „the struggle of man [sic] against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting“. Historians need to do all they can to help people remember because „human beings bereft of the capacity for remembrance are helpless in the face of domination in any of its forms“⁵.

3 „Tape-recording Your Church's History“. In: Baptist History and Heritage, vol. xxix, no. 1, January 1994, pp. 54-57. There is no author to this article since all the material is excerpted from a pamphlet put out by the Southern Baptist Convention.

4 Marsha Hewitt, „The Redemptive Power of Memory: Walter Benjamin and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza“. In: Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion, vol. 10, no. 1, Spring 1994, p. 75.

5 Ibid. p. 73.

Method of Oral History Research⁶

Before Interviewing

The goal for historians is to approximate the truth of the past as closely as is humanly possible. For oral historians the goal is no different and it can be achieved by creating an environment where people feel free to speak the truth to the best of their ability. Historians know that in order for any text to reveal truth there must be strict attention to detail. There are a myriad of details of project plan, setting, equipment, and questions to which the oral historian must attend if the text, the person being interviewed, is to reveal truth. For optimum results a specific plan for the project is needed before the first interview is scheduled or the first question asked.

A plan stating the goals of the project will aid the interviewers in keeping on track as they develop their questions. Clearly stated goals will help keep the project within a set time frame as well. A clear budget to which the participants strictly adhere will ensure the successful completion of the project. The oral history project on Baptists in the former Soviet Union is directed by Professor Walter Sawatsky of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in the US. Dr. Sawatsky developed a five-year funding plan which he presented to the Mennonite Central Committee. Funding was for the purpose of purchasing recording equipment, computers, holding training workshops, and paying for some travel.

Even before the first interview knowing who will administer the project, how it will be financed, what equipment is needed, how many people, what is the purpose of the research, where the results will be stored and how these results will be made available for use are all practical details that anticipated in advance can ease the accomplishing of the oral history collection. From the very beginning legal questions about the status of the interviews, terms and conditions for use of the material, ownership of the tapes, and control of access must be clear to everyone involved in the project. One student who did not make clear from the beginning how the interviews were to be used had some interviewees insist on re-doing the interview once they learned it was for a specific project.

Clarity about the project is both an ethical as well as a legal issue. If people know exactly in what type of project they are participating, then they cannot later claim they were taken advantage of, or treated unfairly. In the US specific release forms have been developed which when signed by both the interviewer and the interviewee protect each from any liability, clearly state where the interview records will be kept and who controls access to them. Then again the US is a very litigious society! In Russia the interviewers quickly learned that asking

⁶ This section is my compilation of material found in the Baptist History and Heritage article cited in footnote 3 above, the lecture by Dr. Pitts cited in footnote 1 above, and material provided by the Baylor University Institute for Oral History.

anyone to sign a form was the quickest way to ensure the person would not participate in the project. Too many associations with the previous regime!

Once it is settled how many people will be involved, how they will work, and how they will be financed, then the task is to develop a list of people to interview. This initial list should show the priority order of the interviews based on the amount of knowledge about the subject each person has. The initial list will not be the final list, no doubt, since interviews can result in leads on other people to include. Contact people ahead of time to explain the nature of the project and ask for their agreement to participate. One recommendation is to write to people first and then follow up with a phone call where a specific appointment for an interview can be made. With a letter and then a phone call prospective interviewees can make thoughtful decisions about their involvement and not react out of surprise. If at all possible, only schedule one person per interview and schedule one interview with the person at a time. Many people require more than one interview and are glad to cooperate if they do not feel pressured to commit to multiple interviews from the beginning. Again, this procedure will vary according to cultural context. Writing and telephoning are not always effective in Moscow or Kiev. Instead the interviewers found establishing contact with people at church, giving them time to think about the project and meeting them again at church was a more effective way to begin.

From the very first attempt to develop a list, project planners need to be inclusive. Different perspectives, insights are gained as people in various roles, of different ages, genders, races and economic status are included. A student doing research for the oral history project about Baptists in the former Soviet Union found out the value of including more people quite by accident. When the project was started the student went off to interview the union leaders about a specific issue of cooperation with the government. This was the standard history approach of beginning at the top, with those in power. By chance the student decided to ask a lay person who was a member of the same church, a knowledgeable person about the same incident, and learned a very different perspective about the union leadership's involvement with the government. From that point on the researcher was determined to interview more types of people.

Who is doing the interviews will make a difference in the results of the interviews. An experienced, quality interviewer will more quickly establish the rapport and trust needed for in-depth interviews. Furthermore, an experienced interviewer will keep the interview focused to gain the most information possible. However, lack of experienced interviewers does not prevent the use of oral history. All four oral history projects in which I have been involved used inexperienced students to conduct the interviews. The projects were not ruined and the students gained experience in conducting interviews that were enjoyable experiences for interviewer and interviewee alike.

Another dimension to this need to be careful in choosing who will do the interviews has to do with the issue of trust. One researcher in the oral history project in Moscow discovered that people were unwilling to discuss anything unless they already knew the interviewer. People did not want to remember the past and certainly had learned in the past not to trust anyone with the truth. If people knew the researcher, especially from the church, they would finally agree to participate. This researcher stressed that it was very important for people to be able to trust that the interviews would not be used „in a wrong way in order to open to others the person's wrong deeds and mistakes. This is the reason why so many old people do not want to return to their past: to remember all their life's mistakes which were heavy burden for churches and the brotherhood of Evangelical-Christians Baptists in the former USSR“⁷. Regardless of who is involved, establishing trust is of utmost importance in gaining the most from the oral history method of research.

Choosing a place for the interview that is quiet and free from distractions is also important to the depth of the interview. The location should be a place where both interviewer and interviewee are comfortable and can talk without being interrupted or feeling other people are listening. However, if anyone is to be unsettled, let it be the interviewer. Frequently meeting in the home of the one being interviewed is the best place. One researcher learned that then having the second interview in the interviewer's home was not a good idea. The person being interviewed was uncomfortable with the strange location and the setting appeared to increase the anxiety of the one being interviewed.

Oral history interviews have been conducted where the interviewer wrote down what was said. However, experienced interviewers recommend a quality tape recorder with an attached microphone as the best equipment for an interview. Placing the tape recorder where it is out of sight of the interviewee, but close enough to the interviewer for necessary adjustments helps free both parties to concentrate on the substance of the interview instead of the mechanics of recording the information. Before arriving for the interview all equipment should be tested so that a minimum of time is spent setting up and the functioning of the recorder does not become the focus of the interview. Some interviewers use video cameras, but the camera can be intrusive. It could require an additional person which could then increase the time it will take to develop rapport and trust. Also it is difficult not to perform in front of a camera which can add an element of distortion to the interview.

Every interview needs to be carefully planned in advance. Some interviewers develop an outline of the interview which they provide the person being interviewed ahead of time. Some ask the person being interviewed to supply them

7 Report from Oleg Turlak, Oral History Workshop, 26 June 1996.

ahead of time with a list of important events in their lives or topics they want to discuss so that there will not be the frustration of leaving out something considered important. Regardless of the information shared ahead of time the interviewer has to be prepared by doing the necessary research to be familiar with the background of the person and the events. This is like any other historical research project in that one grounds oneself in the background before going to the text in order to better understand what is being communicated.

Conducting the Interview

Every source on oral history provides a list of Do's and Don't's for interviewing. The goal of all these instructions is to create an atmosphere that encourages people to tell the truth. It is creating a safe place for disclosure to occur. Body-language, phrasing of questions, responding to the person talking can either create disturbances which curtail the interview or invite people to fuller disclosure. Facial expressions, tone of voice, hesitancy or forcefulness of speech are all clues to which the interviewer pays careful attention.

Arrive on time for the interview. It seems so obvious and simple. However, it is essential from the very first moment to communicate that the person to be interviewed is taken seriously and what they are about to do is important. Contributing to communicating this message is to efficiently set up the equipment and not spend time discussing the subject while distracted by doing something else.

Conducting a practice interview is not recommended because it tends to make people stiff and unnatural when the „real“ interview begins. However it is recommended for the interviewer to review the purpose of the interview and remind the person about to be interviewed of the importance of being open and candid. Interviewers need to speak first so that the date, name of the person and topic of the interview are recorded on tape. Some interviewers even take 2-3 minutes to ask general questions as a way to ease into the interview. The speaking of both persons is then played back so they hear how their voices sound on tape and then the more focused interview begins.

Interviewers have learned from experience to avoid questions that can be answered with „yes“ or „no“ and, instead, to ask open-ended questions that allow people to reminisce and recollect. Why? How? Where? When? questions elicit more remembering. Follow-up questions that clarify information provided or encourage the interviewee to continue their recollections are necessary. Skill in shaping the questions comes from being a good listener. Eye contact, giving undivided attention to the interviewee help create an atmosphere where people are encouraged to speak. Sometimes an interviewer needs to take notes about names, dates, or points for further questions. However, the note-taking should not be so obsessive as to be distracting. While all interviewers are encouraged to be prepared for an interview by having an outline to follow, the outline should

not dictate the interview. Sometimes in remembering new information is revealed that is vital and takes the interview in a different direction. Allow time, silence for people to deal with difficult subjects. Awareness of major changes in a person's life or new information allows the interviewer to sensitively follow-up in learning why these changes occurred and had such significant impact on a person's life.

In the oral history research discipline there are many injunctions for the interviewer not to participate in the interview as if she/he were also being interviewed. While it is recommended that an atmosphere be created that resembles a natural conversation between friends, there is always a significant difference in that the interviewer is not to be a participant in the conversation. A sympathetic, non-judgmental, non-committal interviewer encourages the interviewee to remember more and remember more accurately. Asking leading questions that subtly try to shape the response, injecting one's own opinion, arguing with the interviewee over whether or not they have remembered something correctly, even being too enthusiastic about something someone has said are all ways to manipulate an interview that are strictly to be avoided. Once a person feels manipulated they will cease self-disclosure and begin to provide only what they think the interviewer wants. Memories will be blocked or co-operation may cease altogether.

Controversial or painful subjects should not be introduced at the beginning of the interview. Allow the person to remember the most important events of their life; such life-changing moments as conversion, vocational call, marriage, education, moving, military service before introducing controversial decisions they may have made, or asking specifically about painful memories. Avoid allowing people to say things „off the record“. Such a technique may be necessary for journalists, but is useless to the historian. Encourage people to say everything for the record, but cooperate in delaying the release of the material or controlling access to it. Remembering the difficult times can happen more naturally if it is set in the context of the whole life rather than being the sole focus of the interview. When people feel their privacy will be respected in the way the interview material is used they are also more self-disclosing.

Every interviewer has to deal with the fact that sometimes people being interviewed exaggerate their own importance, or try to avoid talking about times that are for them embarrassing, where they do not feel they were at their best. At other times the interviewer knows the interviewee is giving inaccurate information, or is rambling, wandering off the subject perhaps as an avoidance technique. The key is for the interviewer to learn how to tactfully bring the remembering back to the point. A neutral comment like „There is another perspective on this . . . How do you respond to that?“ is a way to check people on what they are saying without intimidating or manipulating them. Neutral, tactful

comments by the interviewer are essential to keeping the focus on the interviewee and not inserting the interviewer into the interview.

Upon first becoming aware of all the injunctions on how to conduct an interview, I was reminded of all the stress put on historians not to read their own biases and presuppositions back into an historical source. An oral history interview is a slightly different situation, however. All this detail and all these do's and don't's are essential because the interviewer is creating a primary source to be used later. The interview will provide the raw data for coming to understand a person, event, region, or period of history. The historian who uses the interviews will have to analyze and deal with the biases and presuppositions of the person being interviewed, as every historian does with every text. The goal is for the interviewer to provide a source as free from manipulation and the interviewer's biases as possible.

Finally, timing is an important element of an interview. The interviewer is responsible for knowing the length of each side of the tape so that tapes can be changed without interrupting the interview in the middle of an important story or even losing the story because the tape ran out and the person cannot go back and repeat it exactly as they said it the first time. Fatigue will be evident on the tapes so that it is also the interviewer's responsibility not to prolong the interview. Some oral historians suggest that one hour is enough time for each interview while others suggest that 90 minutes is an appropriate length of time for both interviewer and interviewee to be fresh. At the conclusion of an interview another interview can be scheduled. Shorter and more frequent interviewing is preferable because it is more productive than trying to discover everything in one session.

After the interview

Following up the interview with a thank-you letter is an appropriate expression of appreciation for the person who has given of themselves as well as their time in participating in the oral history project. Some interviewers even provide a copy of the interview to the participant as a way of saying thank-you for the contribution the person has made.

Protecting the tapes to ensure they are not accidentally erased or destroyed is essential. Remove the tabs that make sure the tapes cannot be used again. Label the tapes clearly as to name, date, length of interview, subject and then duplicate them promptly storing permanently the originals with a list of the topics covered in the interview.

Interviewers are encouraged to listen to the tapes afterwards as a way to critique their interviewing skills. Listening also helps one discern topics that were not covered, clues that were missed and may require a follow-up interview. What is not agreed upon by oral historians is the value of transcribing the tapes. Some

argue that transcription tempts others who use the interviews to depend on the transcription which distorts meaning communicated by intonation instead of listening to the tapes themselves. All agree that transcribing the tapes is time-consuming and also very expensive if someone else has to be paid to do the transcribing. However, the student researchers who have attempted oral history interviews found transcribing the tapes very helpful to them in processing what had actually happened during the interview. They found that they remembered more, understood better, and learned more about interviewing by going to the trouble to transcribe the tapes. If transcription is done it needs to be exact with all the grammatical errors, pauses, stuttering, and stumbles in the original voice. Another purpose of transcription is to share the text with the person interviewed. Especially if the tape did not pick up clearly what the person said sharing the text with them provides an opportunity for clarification. The danger is that it also provides an opportunity for someone to change what they said. The interviewer must be aware and protect the integrity of the original interview.

Uses of Oral History Research

After careful interviewing, transcribing, and storing of oral history interviews what is the goal of this endeavor, how will these interviews be used? Some oral history projects are devoted entirely to collecting the data to be used later by other historians. Dr. Bill Pitts called this providing a valuable service for future generations. It is a significant undertaking that will benefit future historians⁸. The oral history project about Baptists in the former Soviet Union fits this category at its current stage of development. Now the focus is on interviewing people in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, Odessa, and Kishniev. The process has focused on refining interviewing skills as well as increasing the number of people willing to be interviewed. At some future time, historians like Nikolai Kornilov, for example, who is the Moscow director of the project and historian at the seminary there, will be able to use the data collected to begin the process of interpreting for Baptists in Russia their 20th century history.

However, other oral history projects result in a finished product as the end-goal of the research process. A Visiting Student at IBTS will use interviews collected while here as the basis for the thesis required at the student's national university here in Europe. Publications of various types are frequently the results of these interviews. Günter Balders has already participated in publishing a book about Baptist life in the former DDR based on oral history interviews.

In the US Louis „Studs“ Terkel, cantankerous radio broadcaster from Chicago, contributed to the growth in popularity of this method of historical research with the publication in 1970 of his book, 'Hard Times: An Oral History of the

8 Pitts' lecture 23 June 1996.

Great Depression'. While his methods are now challenged as being too biased, Terkel's book was a path-breaker for popular dissemination of oral history instead of keeping this research in the academy. Now magazines, newspapers, even community news sheets are places for publishing oral history research. Radio shows emphasizing a theme and television documentaries also make use of oral history research. Plays that evoke a specific period and video productions are other media uses of oral history research. The oral history research makes the epoch come alive so that people in the present gain more understanding of the past by hearing the actual voices of people remembering what it was like to live in a time and place now gone⁹.

Dr. Bill Pitts related how his research on the Branch Davidians had consequences which he never could have imagined. A colleague of Dr. Pitts had interviewed a former member of the Davidians which resulted in over 500 pages of transcript from numerous tapes. Also there was a Master's thesis on the Davidians written in 1940 which used the interviewer's notes from untaped oral interviews as its basis. In Dr. Pitts' research of this group he found tracts written by the founder of the cult as well as newspaper accounts of their activities. To quote Dr. Pitts:

„With these materials I was able to reconstruct the thought pattern and communal life of the Davidians, and I presented the results of my research at meetings of the American Academy of Religion. When the disastrous raid on the Branch Davidian compound occurred in 1993, the press poured in from everywhere, and I had about 300 interviews in three weeks' time. It is estimated that the press spent about \$6 billion in coverage of the Branch Davidian affair. This is an event which will be long remembered in American history, but my point, once again, is that oral history provided critical knowledge for reconstructing the Davidian past“¹⁰.

Dr. Pitts concluded his lecture by emphasizing the importance of oral history research to broaden our perspective on the past by preserving the stories, memories, and reflections.

Caution About Oral History Method

With all the positive uses of oral history research I have shared, are there any cautions about this method to be examined? Of course. It is a method dealing with human beings and has many of the same limitations that all texts have. Historians must always deal with the fact that the sources we have are attempts to „set the record straight“ as well as the historian's interpretation of the sources attempting to do the same thing. In fact, Adriana Valerio wrote an entire article on history as the manipulation of memory and demonstrated how different historians researching the same few texts on women in the early church reached diffe-

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

rent conclusions¹¹. Both the texts preserved and the historical interpretations are attempts to persuade, to manipulate how people understand the past. Oral history interviews are no different. Even with the interviewer totally neutral in the process, selection occurs both in what people remember and in who is interviewed.

Dr. Walter Sawatsky elucidated an interesting dimension to this fact when he discussed how interviewers need to be aware of the ways in which societies manipulate the arrangement of public memory. He referred to three publications which have addressed this issue demonstrating how the official public memory of an event changed. Sawatsky pointed out that people reinterpret their understandings of things as they gain new information and try to make sense of it. An obvious example is the way cooperation with authorities may have made more sense in the past than it does in remembering it today when those authorities are no longer in power. He also discussed how public memory of something can be presented differently in an official institutional history, scholarly historical interpretation, and the oral tradition preserved by the people. Contributing to the rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee is if they are both operating within a common framework for the master saga of the era. However, Sawatsky emphasized that knowing the code words and knowing how the public memory has been changed are vital to „making the key elements of that saga conscious and subject to critical reflection [which] is vital for achieving the ‘truth’“¹².

Historical evidence is only a trace of the past. The past can never be recreated, not even in oral history interviews. In fact, Sprunger and Thiesen in their oral history research about Mennonite military service in WW II conclude:

„Recording opinions is what oral history does best, in this case preserving the thoughts, values and convictions. [...] Their „facts“ may, indeed, be wrong, their memories fallible. Oral history is a way of looking at history, not as it really was, but as the participant thinks it was and wishes that it had been“¹³.

Both Dr. Bill Pitts and biblical scholar, Robert McAfee Brown, have pointed out in their research that human memory is selective for a variety of reasons. As Dr. Sawatsky pointed out human memory being rearranged due to external influences, Pitts and Brown discuss the more personal rearrangements because of ego-needs, or memories so painful they are repressed¹⁴. Even texts which have been

11 Adriana Valerio, „Women in Church History“, trans. Paul Burns in: *Women – Invisible in Theology and Church*, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Mary Collins, eds. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd., 1985), pp. 63-71.

12 My notes from Dr. Walter Sawatsky's lecture, 25 June 1996, oral history workshop, IBTS.

13 Keith L. Sprunger and John D. Thiesen, „Mennonite Military Service in World War II: An Oral History Approach“. In: *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, Vol. LXVI, no. 4, October 1992, p. 491.

14 Pitts' lecture, 23 June 1996. Robert McAfee Brown, „Three Sides of Memory“. In: *Christianity and Crisis*, Vol. 49, no. 2, February 20, 1989, p. 31.

preserved are evidences of selective memory. The traces of the past available to us today are texts selected because they were considered important to save. Historians know the dilemma of facing texts that no longer reflect views society holds as important and wondering what else could have been saved and was not. Dealing with the past means dealing with selective memory whether the text is written or a person. The historical discipline is a discipline seeking to illuminate the dialogue between the past and present. Sprunger and Thiesen suggest that oral history only makes more obvious the dialogue that is going on. They suggest that „the oral historian must be ever aware of dealing with fragile, ever-changing material“¹⁵.

Regardless of the caveats about the limitations of human memory, scholars in a variety of disciplines argue for the importance of memory. Dr. Pitts pointed out that what is remembered is important to the one doing the remembering. While absolutely objective truth may be a futile quest for the historian, „with the right question we can recover some human insights before they are lost forever“. This process can be important for the maturing of the church in any location as data is collected and interpretation of the data published¹⁶.

South African theologians Cochrane and West wrote that people must remember their past in order to heal that past. By remembering the past in all its pain, prejudices can be identified and new truths of the structures of society as well as everyone's participation in them can be known. One's identity is shaped by one's history so memories of the past contribute to identity formation in the present. Like Kundera they argue that people can only be free of domination when they remember their history, claim their participation in history, and use the history to move toward a new reality that is not bound by the domination of the past¹⁷.

Robert McAfee Brown also reminds us that it is not whether or not everything is remembered, but how our selective memories are used that is important. People can remember the past and build on it for a better present and future. Or they remember bitterness, desire for revenge and build on that for a diminished present and future. It is not the precision of the memories, but how what is remembered is used that makes a difference. For Brown remembering is essential in creating community. He suggests that in remembering we are remembered, brought again into membership of a community that through time, space, for whatever reason we had been dis-membered, removed and dislocated.

15 Sprunger and Thiesen, p. 491.

16 Pitts' lecture, 23 June 1996.

17 James R. Cochrane and Gerald O. West, „War, Remembrance and Reconstruction“. In: *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, No. 84, September 1993, pp. 25-40.

In remembering we are linked, however tenuously, to those who have gone before us¹⁸.

With all the limitations of memory, remembering the past is still essential to having a future. As a people trying to understand where we have been, how we reached where we are does not predict the future, but on the basis of what has been meaningful points us in a direction. As James Ashbrook wrote, „Imagining a future requires remembering a past. Without a past there is no future, no sense of purpose, no awareness of anything as significant“¹⁹. Remembering the past, recording those memories on tape, video, or in written text is for use in the present and the future. Oral history is a method of historical research that broadens the amount of data available to assist us in understanding and building on the past.

Today the challenge of interpreting the past is formidable. There is more information available than ever before in human history. We are so bombarded with texts, facts, government records, speeches, visual presentations that all of us are on sensory overload. Some wags have even suggested we have more and more data and understand less and less. Oral history encourages us to remember, encourages remembering the past, reflecting and trying to integrate the past. Nevertheless, as Elizabeth Beverly reminds us, the insight necessary to build on the past does not come only from remembering. „What insight there is has come only through the labor of language, the labor of telling as much as I can remember as clearly as I know how“²⁰. Oral history research encourages people to tell as much as they know as clearly as they know how. The historical discipline of using the data to construct interpretation that provokes insight and understanding is more needed than ever. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza reminds us, „[...]our reconstructions of the past shape present and future reality“²¹. May we use all the methods of historical research at our disposal to build constructively.

18 Brown, p. 31.

19 James B. Ashbrook, „Soul: Its Meaning and Its Making“. In: *The Journal of Pastoral Care*, Vol. XLV, no. 2, 1991, p. 163.

20 Elizabeth Beverly, „Meditation on Suokula Summer: Memory and the Mandinko“. In: *Soundings*, 73:2-3 (Summer/Fall 1990), p. 379.

21 Quotation found in Hewitt, p. 86.

‘Oral History’ (Zeitzeugenbefragung) – eine Methode der historischen Forschung

Gekürzte Übersetzung von Martin Rothkegel und Manfred Bärenfänger

Sicherlich hat schon jeder Historiker einmal den Wunsch verspürt, sich mit Personen unterhalten zu können, die Zeugen oder Teilnehmer der von ihm untersuchten Ereignisse waren. Genau das betreibt die ‘Oral History’ (OH) als Methode. Sie will eine unmittelbare und persönlichere Geschichtsdarstellung als geschriebene Texte ermöglichen. Seit dem Zweiten Weltkrieg erlebt diese Methode einen enormen Aufschwung.

OH bedeutet, Zeitzeugen nach ihren Erinnerungen, ihrem Verständnis und nach ihrer Interpretation der Ereignisse zu befragen. Der zu interpretierende ‘Text’ des Historikers sind sozusagen Personen, die bei den Ereignissen dabei waren. Natürlich läßt sich so die Vergangenheit nicht wiederherstellen, aber OH sammelt die Erinnerungen noch lebender Zeitzeugen, die befragt werden und erklären können, „wie es wirklich gewesen ist“.

Auch Journalisten befragen Zeitzeugen. Ihre Interviews können Bestandteil eines OH-Archivs werden. Der Unterschied ist aber, daß Journalisten die Zeugen gewöhnlich unmittelbar nach den Ereignissen befragen, Historiker dagegen wesentlich später. Es geht ihnen weniger um unmittelbare Reaktionen als um Reflexion über die Ereignisse. Sie tragen zum besseren Verständnis des sonstigen Quellenmaterials bei.

OH als wissenschaftliche Disziplin begann in den USA mit einem Projekt des Historikers Allan Nevins von der Columbia University in New York City im Jahre 1947, als er den Quellenwert der Erinnerungen älterer Einwohner für die Geschichte der Städte im amerikanischen Nordosten erkannte. Heute hat diese Universität das größte Archiv von OH-Tonaufzeichnungen und Transkriptionen. Den zweiten Platz beanspruchen sowohl die Baylor University in Waco, Texas, als auch die University of California in Los Angeles. Baylor University ist eine baptistische Hochschule. Ihrem OH-Institut und Dr. William Pitt verdanke ich viel von dem, was ich Ihnen heute vortrage.

Durch eine Arbeit einer Studentin unseres International Baptist Theological Seminary (IBTS) in Prag habe ich von einem OH-Archiv im Britischen Museum in London erfahren. Man kann also sagen, daß vor allem in Englisch sprechenden Ländern solche Forschungszentren entstehen.

Die Gebiete, auf denen mit OH gearbeitet wird, sind sehr zahlreich. Ein flüchtiger Überblick stößt auf Holocaust-Studien, z.B. über die Schweizer Bankguthaben und Forderungen daraus, sowie über jüdische Gemeinden, über amerikanische Indianer- und australische Aboriginekulturen. Ich bin besonders vertraut mit Baptistengemeinden, die alle paar Jahre Jubiläen feiern. Dabei trägt OH

zum besseren Verständnis des Gemeindelebens und seiner Bedeutung für Mission und Gesellschaft bei.

OH gibt den Unterdrückten ihren Platz in der Geschichte zurück. Die Vergangenheit wird nur recht verstanden, wenn Sieger *und* Besiegte bedacht werden. Der tschechische Schriftsteller Milan Kundera hat einmal geschrieben: „Der Kampf des Menschen gegen die Macht ist ein Kampf der Erinnerung gegen das Vergessen“.

Die Methode der ‘Oral History’

Das Ziel des Historikers ist es, der Wahrheit der Vergangenheit so nahe zu kommen, wie es Menschen nur möglich ist. Um mit Hilfe der OH zu zuverlässigen Ergebnissen zu kommen, muß noch vor der Befragung ein genauer Plan des Forschungsprojektes erstellt werden. Der Interviewer muß sich darüber im Klaren sein, welche Fragen er stellen muß. Ein Zeitplan und eine Kostenkalkulation sind nötig und die Atmosphäre muß bedacht werden, in der die Befragten so frei wie möglich sprechen können.

Auch rechtliche Fragen sind zu klären. Die Befragten müssen genau wissen, welchem Ziel die Befragung dient und wer später Zugang zu den Tonbändern und Transkriptionen bekommen wird. Im prozeßsüchtigen Amerika sind dafür bestimmte Regeln üblich.

Die Liste der zu befragenden Personen sollte möglichst ausgewogen sein, um ein Bild der Ereignisse aus möglichst verschiedenen Perspektiven zu erhalten. Die Befragung von Baptisten und Evangeliumschristen in der früheren Sowjetunion hat gezeigt, was für ein unterschiedliches Bild sich ergeben kann, je nach dem ob man Kirchenführer oder Gemeindemitglieder über das Verhältnis der Gemeinden zum Staat befragt.

Zwischen Frager und Befragtem muß Vertrauen herrschen. Bei einer Befragung in Moskau war es sehr wichtig, klarzumachen, daß die Interviews im Blick auf Fehler, die jemand in der Vergangenheit begangen hat, vertraulich behandelt würden. Das ist der Grund, warum viele nicht an die Vergangenheit erinnert werden wollen: das Erinnern an die Vergangenheit wurde zu einer schweren Belastung für die Gemeinden und die Bruderschaft der Evangeliumschristen-Baptisten in der früheren Sowjetunion.

Besser als Mitschreiben ist die Aufzeichnung des Gespräches mit einem guten Kassettenrekorder. Videoaufnahmen dagegen lenken den Befragten leicht ab.

Es folgen eine Reihe weiterer praktischer Ratschläge für eine gute Gesprächsführung: gezielte Fragen, vertrauensvolles Verhalten, offene Atmosphäre. Umstrittene oder schmerzliche Themen sollten nicht am Anfang stehen. Wichtig ist ein guter Zeitplan. Eventuell sind weitere Gespräche zu vereinbaren.

Nach dem Interview

Nach Abschluß der Befragung sollte man sich mit einem Brief dafür bedanken, daß der Befragte etwas von seinem Leben preisgegeben hat. Ein gutes Zeichen des Dankes ist eine Kopie des Interviews.

Die Tonbänder sollten geschützt werden, damit sie nicht irrtümlich überspielt werden können. Name, Zeit und Thema ist darauf zu vermerken.

Umstritten ist das Abschreiben des Interviews. Es ist zeitraubend und gibt nicht immer den Tonfall und die Bedeutung wieder. Andererseits zeigt sich, daß ein Abschreiben zu einem besseren Verstehen der Situation führt. Wer sich dafür entscheidet, muß es mit allen grammatischen Fehlern, Pausen und Verlegenheiten tun, auch das Zittern der Stimme vermerken.

Der Gebrauch der 'Oral History'

Wie können Tonbänder oder Transkriptionen verwandt werden? Einige Projekte dienen der späteren Weiterarbeit durch andere Historiker. Dr. Bill Pitts sieht darin einen wertvollen Dienst für zukünftige Generationen. Das von Günter Balders, Ulrich Materne u.a. herausgegebene Buch 'Erlebt in der DDR'. Berichte aus dem Bund Evangelisch-Freikirchlicher Gemeinden (Oncken Verlag Wuppertal und Kassel 1995) basiert weithin auf Zeitzeugenbefragung. Dr. Pitts ist überrascht, welche Bedeutung seine Forschungen über die Sekte der Davididen bekommen sollten. Ein Kollege von ihm interviewte ein früheres Davididen-Mitglied mit dem Ergebnis von über 500 Seiten transkribierter Tonbänder. Darüber hinaus gab es eine Magisterarbeit aus dem Jahre 1940, die auf einer schriftlich, nicht mit Tonträgern, festgehaltenen Befragung beruht. Dies Material diene der Öffentlichkeit, die Tragödie von 1993 (des Massenselbstmordes) zu beleuchten.

Warnungen vor Mißbrauch

OH befaßt sich mit Menschen und unterliegt damit menschlicher Begrenzung. Der Historiker muß sich bewußt sein, daß die Quellen Versuche sind, Ereignisse ins rechte Licht zu rücken. Seine Auswertung verfolgt das gleiche Ziel. Aber die Geschichte kann auch die Erinnerung manipulieren. Aus mancherlei Gründen selektiert das menschliche Gedächtnis, entweder durch äußere Einflüsse, persönliche Bedürfnisse oder schmerzhaft Erfahrungen. Aufgabe des Historiker ist es, den Dialog zwischen Vergangenheit und Gegenwart zu erhellen. OH ist ein Beispiel dafür, wie dieser Dialog verläuft.

Bei aller Begrenzung der Erinnerung ist das Erinnern an die Vergangenheit immer noch entscheidend für die Gestaltung der Zukunft.

Buchempfehlungen zur Einführung in die OH

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