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ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS AS HISTORICAL SOURCES IN THE CLASSROOM

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Among the various benefits of the use of oral history at a pedagogical level (and I am considering here school history as well as other learning environments or purposes), one may stress: a) the possibilities opened by getting in touch with different life story narratives – different experiences narrated according to different points of view, and b) the epistemological approach, necessary to develop a critical view vis-à-vis the ways we learn about the past (and the present). We can say that a) concerns the “content” in history education (or what we can know about the past) and b) focuses on the method (how can we know about the past?). Putting a) and b) together, students (and teachers) can ask themselves how the ways we know about the past (that is, b) finish by conditioning *what* we know (that is, a). It is worthy to notice, however, that these benefits are not exclusive to oral history interviews, but concern every historical source, which has the capacity to bring into the learning environment a multiplicity of experiences (and, therefore, the potential to question single stories¹) and to remember teachers and students about the specificity of historical knowledge (that is, a knowledge that is conditioned by the questions we ask the sources).²

¹ I am alluding here to the very pregnant speech by Chimamanda Adichie at “TED”, called “The danger of a single story” (http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html, access on 19/10/2011).

² See, among others, Peter Lee. “Putting Principles into

I have chosen one particular oral history interview to illustrate the points synthesized above. The example allows us, moreover, to tackle another important perspective opened by the use of oral history sources in learning environments: the teaching of controversial or sensitive issues. John Mautner was interviewed by Vera Egermayer in Waikanae, near Wellington, New Zealand, in 2000, in the context of the Czech Immigrants Oral History Project run by Alexander Turnbull Library Oral History Center, part of New Zealand's National Library. In August 1919, John was born to a German-speaking Jewish family in the city of Brno, in the newly founded state of Czechoslovakia. In July 1939, at the age of 18, he immigrated to New Zealand together with his sister Gerty, who was three years younger than him. Their parents had great difficulty in arranging the journey and were unable to travel themselves because his Communist-activist brother Fritz, who was three years older, was arrested two weeks after German troops occupied Bohemia in March 1939.

Practice: Understanding History.” In: National Research Council (U.S.). *How Students Learn: History in the Classroom*. Committee on *How People Learn*, A Targeted Report for Teachers. M. Suzanne Donovan & John D. Bransford (Ed.) Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2005, p. 31-77. Available at http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=11100#toc.

About 40 minutes into the interview, after John Mautner talked about his childhood and youth in Brno, German occupation, his brother's arrest, attempts to emigrate to various countries and acceptance by New Zealand, the interviewer asked about the day they left:

Do you remember the leave taking, saying goodbye to your parents?

Yes, it was at the railway station in Prague. We went from Brno to Prague and... Well, first of all, we were not able to pay for the shipping fares, because we couldn't get foreign currency and nobody wanted Czech crowns, and you couldn't send German marks out anyhow. So, the only way to get it was: it was paid by a Jewish refugee organization which was based in Paris. And they paid for the fares of Gerty and me which was... it wasn't much, I think a hundred and ninety pounds for the two of us.

And your mother was organizing all this?

She was organizing that. Now, we had the fares... They suddenly realized, at the last minute, that we had to get to France to get onto the ship, and so they sent us rail tickets. But somebody in the organization didn't realize at the time – which was June, July 39 – that Czechoslovakia was already occupied by the Germans. Because those rail tickets tried to eliminate Germany from the itinerary, so I mean that, from the Czechoslovakia... It was a rail ticket from Brno to Hungary, to Yugoslavia, to Italy, to France. Now to be able to use those tickets with about three or four days to go, we would have had to have a visa from Hungary, a visa from Yugoslavia, a visa from Italy and a visa from France to get there, which was just an absolute impossibility. So we managed to just go to the railway office and buy a ticket from Prague to Toulon. (...)

We were in Prague the last two or three days, actually. I remember having the last evening... We went up to a very nice restaurant (...), had some wine, and whatever. It was a magnificent evening, and it was July, mid-summer, nice

weather. And next morning we just went to the railway station... And then we suddenly realized we didn't have a French visa...

But when you were saying goodbye did you have any idea that that might be the last time?

No, absolutely not. On the railway station you say goodbye the way you say goodbye, and you embrace and you wave and that's it. (...)

Then back to the practicalities: you then needed another visa.

Yes, which we didn't have. We couldn't get the visa because it was Bastille day. It was a French national holiday on the day that we... The embassy was closed in Prague.

14th of July 1939. So what did you do?

We went without, which was alright.³

In this excerpt (which could not be quoted in full here), the interviewer is seen to pursue one aim - a description of the farewell - but the conversation takes a different route, which happens very often in oral history interviews. An interview is not just an account of the past, but also a record of actions undertaken in the present by interviewee and interviewer.⁴ In this respect, it is a complex document, whose nuances must be taken into account for classroom use. How would an excerpt like this be used in a history lesson on the holocaust?

Teachers – like every researcher – must make choices. The practice of oral history as a research methodology that creates sources shows us that the interview has to be taken as a whole. Like in a hermeneutic circle, in an oral history interview the parts are to be understood in relation to the whole and vice-versa.⁵ But in a lesson

³ Interviewed February 23, 2000, side 2, tape 1, min. 12. Oral History Interview, Alexander Turnbull Library, New Zealand.

⁴ In this respect, see Verena Alberti, "O que documenta a fonte oral: a ação da memória", in: *Ouvir contar: textos em história oral*. Rio de Janeiro, Editora FGV, 2004, p. 33-43.

⁵ See, among others, Verena Alberti, "A existência na

or a historic exhibition, the audience generally has not enough time nor availability to listen and to analyse the interview in its entirety. In that case, one has to be sure that the audience is informed about the historical context and the interviewee's biographical background, before examining the excerpt: who speaks?, when?, why was he/she invited to tell his/her life story? We may say that teachers themselves function as suppliers of data concerning the "whole", in order to work out some "parts" in the classrooms. Having listened and analysed the interview, the teacher can abridge some facts that are important to understand the particular life story, but whose narrative itself may be left aside.

Besides, it can be worthy to complement the interview excerpt with other resources. For instance, a map scheme that synthesises John Mautner's and his sister's journey until they reached New Zealand: in Toulon, they were able to obtain permission to stay there for three days without a French visa, while waiting to board the ship that took them and other refugees to New Zealand, putting in at Naples, Port Said (Egypt), Aden (Yemen), Colombo (Sri Lanka) and four Australian ports – Fremantle, Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney – where they had to board another vessel for Wellington. After 45 days traveling, they reached their destination on August 29, 1939. In spite of knowing the effects of holocaust on many European families, the magnitude of John's and Gerty's geographical shift can be surprising for a great majority of pupils – moreover, if they realise that both undertook the journey probably at the same age they find themselves in when listening to the story.

But as observed in the beginning of this text, the working out of oral history interviews in learning environments has to go beyond their content (what can we know about the past). Even in face of a brief passage, teachers and pupils can benefit from knowing not only the different stories they are being told but also the interviewee's and interviewer's purposes. It is thus important to ask, as well, who is

listening to the interviewees story?, how is he/she listening?, and why? That is, students should be encouraged to pay attention to the interviewer's role and influence over the narrative they are listening to. Afterwards, we can ask them to think if there is a substantial difference between an oral source and other historical sources, regarding the fact that both are constructed according to some purposes.

Before going on, I would like to conclude the story of John Mautner and his sister. John had been on an agriculture course at a technical school in Czechoslovakia (a crucial point for the New Zealand's authorities acceptance of him as a refugee) so when he arrived he got a job on an inland sheep farm on the North Island, far from civilization. At Christmas, he met up with his sister and other refugees in Wellington, and clearly remembers that Gerty and he spent whole afternoons in the music section of the city's library listening to classical music, which they had learned to appreciate in Brno. Until 1941, they got very little news of their family, but then a cousin wrote to tell them their parents had been transported from Brno. After the war, they got the definitive news:

When did you first hear about their fate?

After the war, when my brother Fritz came returned from Buchenwald and went to Brno, he apparently met somebody who survived Auschwitz – I can't remember his name now –, but who apparently had either met or knew of Emma, my mother, and knew that my father had been shot by the Germans when the Russians were approaching. Because they were in Minsk – I think it was Minsk they were – and as far as I know Emma was working in SS barracks, that meant to me at least that they possibly may not have been starving too much, because she had been able to get scraps and bits of pieces back from the barracks or something. But when the Russians approached then at first father was shot and then later on mother was sent to Auschwitz, and she survived a little bit longer, but not for very long.

história: revelações e riscos da hermenêutica" *Estudos Históricos*. Rio de Janeiro, CPDOC-FGV, v.9, n.17, 1996, p.31-57. Available at <http://bibliotecadigital.fgv.br/ojs/index.php/reh/article/view/2013/1152>.

So you had that confirmation after the war?

After the war, yes. Because there were lists coming, you see? I mean, after the war, all the refugees were sort of waiting for these lists that were coming of survivors and there were all sorts of false hopes. It wasn't until I actually had contact with my brother that we found out of...

(...)When you had that terrible definitive news did that change anything in you, I mean, about your feelings towards New Zealand, or your future?

Not really. I mean, at that stage, 1945, 46, I think we had become New Zealanders.⁶

For almost 40 years, John worked in the physics laboratory of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR) in Wellington, where he had moved in 1943, before the war ended. He married a New Zealand girl of Scottish Presbyterian descent, and had two daughters; Gerty too had three children, two girls and a boy.⁷ John turned 90 in August 2009. Obviously the holocaust marked their lives and those of their children and grandchildren forever.

* * *

John's interview is an example of learning resource that can be used in the teaching of the holocaust. Nevertheless, other sensitive matters can also benefit from oral history interviews as effective sources in the classroom. The teaching of controversial issues in history classes is a subject that has been studied for some years now, and it has prompted debates and articles of interest to my purpose here. In 2007, for example, the British Historical Association produced a report called *Teaching Emotive and Controversial History (TEACH)* and at least one issue of its review *Teaching History* was devoted to the subject.⁸ The very definition of

what constitutes a sensitive or controversial issue in history teaching has been the subject of extensive debate, and the authors of the *TEACH Report* reached the following consensus:

The study of history can be emotive and controversial where there is actual or perceived unfairness to people by another individual or group in the past. This may also be the case where there are disparities between what is taught in school history, family/community histories and other histories. Such issues and disparities create a strong resonance with students in particular educational settings.⁹

Examples of controversial issues are religion in Northern Ireland, immigration into Western European countries, racism, the holocaust, slavery and the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans.

Remark that we are on the terrain of disputed memories, and schools provide perhaps the most obvious political stages in this respect. Recent debates in the field of history teaching have noted that it is worthy to bring to the classroom the discussion on collective memory.¹⁰ Today's world scenario requires profound reconsideration of our treatment of the past, unlike the situation in the mid-20th century, when national master narratives were relatively easy to produce and reproduce. On the one hand, oral history interview excerpts are without doubt a privileged way to give access to the experience of diversity. On the other hand, however, it is necessary to point out that they have to be considered as his-

September 2007 (available at

http://www.history.org.uk/resources/secondary_resource_780.html). *Teaching History 127: Sense and Sensitivity*. Historical Association, June 2007 (available to members at http://www.history.org.uk/resources/secondary_resource_850_12.html).

⁹ *TEACH Report*, p. 3.

¹⁰ See, among others, Carretero, M.; Rosa, A. & González, M.F. (org.). *Enseñanza de la historia y memoria colectiva*. Buenos Aires, Paidós, 2006, and Stuurman, S. & Grever, M. (ed.). *Beyond the Canon. History for the 21st Century*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

⁶ Interviewed February 23, 2000, side 5, tape 3, min. 21.

⁷ Gerty Gilbert was also interviewed for the National Library of New Zealand on October 30, 1984 as part of the "Europeans Refugees to New Zealand" collection (interviewed by Ann Beaglehole OHInt-0009/08).

⁸ The Historical Association. *TEACH Teaching Emotive and Controversial History 3-19*. A Report from The Historical Association on the Challenges and Opportunities for Teaching Emotive and Controversial History 3-19, 5th

torical sources, like other sources to be worked out in the teaching-learning process, rather than as pieces of denunciation of past injustices or as revelations of “true history”. Since the school is also an ambit in which societies dispute possible memories about themselves, that approach is not as self evident as it can seem at first.

How should we take up these issues serenely while ensuring historical rigour, not only for elementary or secondary schools, but also for adults visiting historic exhibitions, for example? Apprehension of sensitive issues is informed by what we may call “public history” (film and media in general) and also by prejudices we learn from the groups we are part of (family, schoolmates, coworkers, etc.). How can these prejudices be undermined and prior knowledge redirected without pupils or other audiences losing interest or feeling they are being accused or made to feel guilty?

One of the principles posed by the *TEACH Report* is the use of effective resources that are attractive and stimulating and can make personal engagement more likely – such as individual narratives and experiences. This certainly applies to oral history interviews and narratives such as John Mautner’s. A significant story can make students change from the ‘why should I care?’ position to ‘let’s have a look’.

But it is not enough to draw pupils in on this way, making them feel empathy and perhaps even compassion, then supposing the task has been completed. The holocaust, or slavery, or other issues of this magnitude were such extreme episodes in human history that we often feel powerless in the face of the intellectual effort required to explain them historically. The main question left hanging in the air in classroom discussions, or at a film, or when reading books etc. is “how could this happen?” Obviously just explaining the phenomenon by dividing the world into “bad people” or psychopaths, and “good people” or victims and heroes, is not an adequate response.

One of the recurring issues in the literature on teaching controversial or sensitive issues is precisely their drawing attention to the fact that pupils and teachers require time and willingness to tackle

a complex subject by leaving behind black-and-white and moving into a grey area.¹¹ If there is time to work out a theme during some weeks, the teacher may decide to distribute among the students different oral history interviews, to be listened and analysed, and then presented and discussed in the entire classroom. Ideally the analysis should follow some guidelines, defined together by pupils and teacher, as part of a research project, and consider other historical sources.

Paul Salmons, professor at the Holocaust Education Development Program of the Institute of Education, University of London, argues for the specificity of holocaust teaching in history classes, and sees historical research as the most appropriate way of tackling the complexities of the past:

Historical enquiry will reveal to students the complexities of the world in which choices were actually made and decisions taken; only then can people’s actions (and inaction) be judged within the context of their time, and only then can we begin to draw meaningful lessons for today.¹²

The first concern, then, in relation to choice of material, is that it must be useful for generating discussion. Once the issue has been raised, pupils should be given sources so that they themselves can explain what happened – rather than listen to a prepared speech from the teacher. This gets pupils involved in finding the answer, which guarantees that something will remain as a result of the research. If the subject is controversial, they can not ignore evidence. And they may be able to change their initial views.

¹¹ An interesting example of how to deal with complex issues may be found in an article by Alison Stephen in *Teaching History* 120, Diversity and Divisions, September 2005. The article points to very interesting suggestions on how to take up the Arab-Israeli conflict in the classroom. See also, in addition to the *TEACH Report*, an article by Andrew Wrenn and Tim Lomas, in *Teaching History* 127, Sense & Sensitivity.

¹² Paul Salmons. “Teaching or Preaching? The Holocaust and intercultural education in the UK” in: *Intercultural Education*, Vol. 14, No. 2, June 2003, p.139-149, p.143-44.

A third point recurring in the literature on teaching controversial or sensitive issues – along with time to address issues in sufficient depth and appropriate sources – is an emphasis on diversity of experiences, which enables teachers to deal with our tendency to homogenize groups as if "Jews", "immigrants", "blacks" and so on were self-explanatory units. We well know that one of the characteristics of oral history interviews is their uniqueness, which means the experience is very difficult to generalize. Sometimes this may be a problem for us because there is no doubt that the maximum amount of diversity prevents generalizations in history, but in the case of sensitive or controversial issues, the possibility of de-homogenization offered by oral source may become a positive element in the classroom. Different pre-war life styles, for example, may be useful to examine the crystallized notion of "Jews as victims" that is echoed by many images of starving people, or piles of corpses in concentration camps, as found in books, documentaries, etc. The principles of holocaust teaching include precisely respect for victims and pupils who may be mobilized without being traumatized. A dialogue like the one between John Mautner and his interviewer quoted above will bring out the conflicts involved in surviving in occupied Czechoslovakia, and opens up the possibility of contact with one of the many life-stories that were profoundly altered in that situation. Individual stories may be more effective than the inconceivably huge numbers involved in mass killings.

This is obviously applicable to other sensitive topics too. For example, to mention just one case, a DVD produced by the Ipswich Caribbean Experience (ICE) oral history project preserves the experiences of first-generation Caribbean immigrants who traveled to Ipswich in Suffolk, England, in the 1950s. Using these interviews to teach history in local schools enabled pupils to question the homogenized "Afro-Caribbean immigrant" image, since their experiences were quite diverse and some of those interviewed even asserted that life in the Caribbean, including the quality of schooling, was better than what they went on to experience after

immigrating.¹³

This suggests that we should find sources, situations or pieces of evidence for which pupils' preconceived ideas no longer function. Narratives and personal experiences may well be an important resource in this process. Firstly because, as noted above, they are attractive by their very nature: enabling access to a personal story that makes history with a capital "H" more concrete and perceptible. Secondly, because they can be effective as sources for research by lending an air of authenticity to the subject matter being investigated, unlike fictional or feature films whose main aim is to reach an audience on the emotional level without necessarily prompting them to think about the issues. However, as noted above, just showing pupils a story is not enough. It has to be contextualized, along with sources and reports so that it becomes historically grounded and capable of contributing to the experience of authenticity. A point to bear in mind is what a source may tell us, or not tell us, in relation to the issue being researched. We are well aware that our oral history interviews, and indeed all historical sources, reach only a part of what we are attempting to understand, and in many cases (again, like all historical sources) may be documenting something that there was no original intention of documenting. So how may we use these sources in history lessons?

A most interesting proposal comes from The Holocaust Educational Trust, which, together with the Shoah Foundation Institute of the University of Southern California, produced the interactive DVD *Recollections. Eyewitnesses remember the Holocaust* (2007). Before presenting excerpts from interviews with Holocaust survivors, the DVD has a whole section called "Previewing" that contains suggestions for classroom work relating to the nature of this source. Ini-

¹³ Rosie Sheldrake & Dale Banham. "Seeing a different picture: exploring migration through the lens of history." *Teaching History* 129, Disciplined Minds. December 2007, 39-47. See also http://www.bbc.co.uk/suffolk/content/articles/2005/09/09/ipswich_caribbean_experience_feature.shtml, accessed March 22, 2010.

tially, pupils are asked to compare excerpts from two films - one from a documentary on the holocaust and the other from an interview - and think about the characteristics of the latter: its being an account of the past, a primary source, edited with a narrator or voice over, edited with archive footage (news reels, newspapers, photos), edited with mood music, whether it is very poignant etc. This enables them to learn how to distinguish filmed or taped interviews from documentaries. Then they prepare and conduct an interview with a classmate, following very clear instructions. At the end of this phase, they are asked the following questions: Which answers could have been found in a text book and which could not? How much of the interview contained just facts? What did you learn that could only have been told to you by this person? What made the interview different from reading the information in a book or on a website? A penultimate phase consists of weighing the emotional impact of an excerpt from the interview. Shony Braun, a survivor from Romania, talks about how he was forced to incinerate (in the crematorium) a man who hadn't died in the gas chamber. The extract is really very poignant, and pupils are asked to answer two questions: What does this clip start you thinking about? and How does the clip make you feel? The instructions clearly state that there is no one right way to answer the question, since some pupils may find it hard to describe feelings, while others may find it easier, and there is no right or wrong way to react to eyewitness testimonies. Finally, the last phase draws pupils' attention to the process of selecting excerpts from interviews and then watching them:

Some of the testimonies were originally very long and some parts are easier to follow than others. (...) This activity will get you thinking about why certain clips were chosen. We should remember that all testimonies are valuable learning resources, even those that might be difficult to follow.

The suggested task is watching the two clips of interviews and then filling out a form comparing them, responding to quite specific questions such as:

- Whether the clip may be understood alone, or leaves viewers with many unanswered questions;
- Are the basic "who, what, where, and how?" questions answered in the clip?;
- Is the historical content evident and accurate?;
- Does the clip have a clear beginning, middle and end?;
- Is the eyewitness' story told in a linear fashion or does s/he alternate between topics?;
- Does the eyewitness offer a personal reflection on the experience or is s/he just recapping a historical event?;
- Is the clip poignant, emotional, or dramatic?;
- Is the sound background okay?
- Are there too many interviewer interruptions?.

The final questions pupils are asked are:

- "Why do you think the activities relating to the DVD will use edited clips rather than whole testimonies?" and
- "Would you like to watch whole testimonies from eyewitnesses? Give your reasons."

These suggestions for use with the *Recollections* DVD – along with others, of course – may be helpful for teachers working with oral history interviews in history classes. Discussing the specificity of a source is critical to help pupils learn how to work with it. Indeed, this concern should be noted for other types of sources too – written documents, photographs, cartoons etc. – which may not always answer the basic "who, what, where and how" questions; which have historical content that may not be accurate, and which may leave us with many unanswered questions. The basics of classroom work with sources are not very different to those required of historians, who must be aware of contexts and purposes associated with documents they examine.

I said earlier that it is not enough to provide students with emotionally charged extracts from

interviews, or films, and thereby conclude their learning of a sensitive issue. A personal-experience narrative may draw them closer to the issue and pose problems to be investigated, but they need explanations and more documents relating to the context and the story being told. As already observed, were I to introduce pupils to the two extracts from the interview with John Mautner as quoted above, I would have to provide more details to contextualize them, as well as other sources to enable pupils to research the subject. (I could even tell them that John Mautner is my father's cousin, so my grandfather who immigrated to Brazil in 1918 was a brother of John's mother. This would not help make the report more accurate, but perhaps more attractive, by being more concrete in the eyes of my pupils, and at the same time might help them talk about examples of similar experiences from their own families.) But contextualizing a story is still not enough, as noted above. The source ought to be discussed too – not for being more or less reliable

than others, but because this gives pupils an opportunity to clearly see how knowledge acquired depends on the limits of sources we consult, as well as their potentialities and specific characteristics. As observed above, the interviews may provide, on the one hand, the multiplicity of experiences and, on the other, the possibility of thinking about the nature of historical knowledge. This is surely something that pupils may experience when we use oral history interviews in the class-room.



[This article derived from Alberti's post-doctorate research in the field of history teaching at the University of East Anglia and Institute of Education of the University of London, in 2009]