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Memorializing effervescence

From creation to communication

The tyranny of memory has produced an effervescence of memorializing. The recent past has been marked by a worldwide proliferation of museums, monuments and memorials. I am particularly thinking of traumatic situations although this enthusiasm for memorializing encompasses other themes. Personal recollections have doubtlessly become a genre posing countless problems, of which I will not speak, but they have also become a privileged way to enter the past.

I have put a lot of thought into this presentation in order to avoid repetition of matters well known. Consequently I decided to compare two types of projects in which I have been involved, and share with you their points of coincidence and divergence.

The first type involves interviews for a specific research project (immigrants, exiles, themes linked to nationalism). I have a clear hypothesis and know what I want and why. I create a narrative that accounts for my interpretation of all the sources I use (of varied and specific natures). In sum, at least for the topics I have researched, oral sources become just one more source. The creator and user of the interview confronts specific problems concerning the use of an adequate tech-

nique, the interplay of subjectivity during the interview, the peculiar relationship established with the interviewee, the interviewer's role as secondary witness during the course of the interview. To this he or she will later add the subjectivity inherent in the process of interpretation of the sources so created.

The second type of project involves interviews to constitute a collection. To create an oral history collection is a much more complex task than interviewing for a specific research project.

Classical archival procedures, established in the second half of the nineteenth century and oriented toward the conservation of spontaneously produced written documents, have paid little attention to oral sources. Yet, in the last few decades, not so much in Argentina as elsewhere, public archives as well as those of corporations and civil and community associations have engaged in producing collections of oral sources. Criteria as to when, why and how to produce such collections are essential in any project undertaking the challenge.

A central characteristic of an oral history collection is its deliberate production of sources. Although certainly not unique in consciously forging material for the historian or researcher of the future, an oral collection has the peculiarity of springing from and being progressively shaped by

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the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee. The critical spirit proper to working with any source is here also exercised throughout the processes of forming the collection.

Designing a collection poses the problem of imagining questions that will preoccupy historians and general users in decades to come. There is a need then to collect information widely and deeply, so as not to miss multiple and diverse points of view about the same phenomena from different social actors.

The historian as interviewer, acting in this case like an archivist, keeps the production of oral sources separate from their use and treatment. There are many examples of this in the world, perhaps the best known being that of the French Social Security Collection, but also and more recently the Millenium Collection undertaken in Great Britain or the so-called sensitive archives on apartheid in South Africa or on the war in Algiers.

I have participated in the design and execution of work of this kind in two different institutional contexts. The first was the Oral Collection of the University of Buenos Aires. The second, the Open Memory Oral Collection, a work begun in 2001 and still in progress, to collect testimonies on State terrorism in Argentina, seen from the perspective of different actors affected by it.

Both experiences have elements in common. Design is certainly one of them. This requires defining themes, characteristics of the sampling and different categories of interviewees, and considering a universe representative not of the numbers but of the diversity of experiences, all the while avoiding reaching what Daniel Bertaux called the saturation point. I want to point out, so as not to appear naive, that we also kept in mind debates on the complexities of interviewing, the role of the interviewer, the subjectivity in witnesses' narra-

tives and the problems of memory and its relation to history.¹ Both were projects to produce and preserve a historical heritage for the purpose of creating primary sources to be used by future researchers, students, historians, journalists and citizens interested in issues held in the collection.

I want to consider now what was different in each experience. The Open Memory Collection aims at retrieving recollections of a traumatic and as yet unresolved past. So one has to add to the problems we all know concerning memory, the problems of remembering traumatic events.

No memory is primary since it is always affected by elements not derived from experience. This is even more so when events are traumatic: a hole is then created in experience and events are processed through mediations of form, types, archetypes and stereotypes which are assimilated and elaborated in the course of a lifetime. The transmission of the past through memory is always troublesome, particularly when traumatic events generate what Charlotte Delbo calls "deep memory" –memory made of experiences hard to translate into words.²

On the other hand, this memorialist effervescence has its own rhythm of remembering: a time for silence, a time for bearing witness, a time for reconstruction and recognition. The last stage puts the question of politics on the table, a politics explicitly concerned with collective memory and the creation and preservation of archives.

Changes in the social, cultural and political context in which stories are told no doubt may reshape and modify remembrances. Many of the testimonies we collect today could not have been obtained a decade ago. This is important in Argentina, where a huge vacuum of documentation exists for the last dictatorship, making oral testimonies an essential factor for recovering that

experience. Many and quite diverse stories are needed to establish painful social experiences.

The creation of the Oral Collection on State Terrorism in Argentina

We must be wary of a view that implies only filling the gaps. Oral testimonies are not only an alternate form of documentation. They are a privileged instrument to place lived experience at the center. It is necessary to realize that oral sources reconstruct selectively and one should not expect to grasp the past without considering hidden stories, as did the dominant naive realism of early oral history and still evident in some practitioners.³

These issues, while we recognize the value of oral histories, make us aware of the limitations and problems involved in using them as sources for the reconstruction of the recent past. And all these issues, to which we may add how and what groups or individuals remember, get even more complex when it comes to traumatic memories.

The main purpose of the project has been to produce oral history interviews on State terrorism in Argentina from the perspectives of social memory and the transmission of experience to future generations, and thus contribute to documenting, studying and interpreting this historical process of extreme characteristics. It is not then a research project on the period. It seems important to draw a line between retrieving and using the past. The demand for retrieving the past does not say anything on the use that will be made of it.

The specificity of our interviews

Creating an oral collection requires identifying the

groups to be represented, obtaining a percentage of comparable interviews in each different category and making categories as varied as possible. I am not thinking of statistical models or of representative samplings. And yet it is important to have a somewhat even representation of different categories. Our collection seeks to retrieve the centrality of terror with its baggage of social, political, economic and cultural changes in Argentine society. We also want to recreate memory from different planes and spaces. With these purposes in mind, we developed interviewee categories or types that would enable us to know, on the one hand, multiple voices and experiences, and on the other, different dimensions and practices of State terrorism in Argentina.

The interviewee categories are: immediate family (mothers, fathers, sons, grandmothers, spouses and so on), survivors (who physically underwent illegal repression), members of human rights organizations, militants, exiles, legal political prisoners, social actors whose testimony evinces traces of repression, social actors who consider themselves directly affected, church members, academics who study the phenomenon, politicians, trade unionists and public personalities. The categories do not constitute excluding universes. On the contrary, they were continuously adjusted as we obtained testimonies. It follows that many of the interviewees do not belong exclusively in one category but may fit in two or more (family-member of human rights organization-political prisoner). These categories also serve as a starting point for future series within the Collection, some admitting more than one category and others standing on their own specificity.

In the first phase of the project we interviewed a substantial number of mothers and members of human rights' organizations. Our

universe is still short or inexistent in other categories, a pending task. Most of the interviews, given our financial resources, have been carried out in the city of Buenos Aires. These are clear weaknesses in the collection as we close the first phase. We will have to plan how to overcome them.

In the case of relatives of vanished persons (*desaparecidos*), one important objective has been to restore individuality to the victims, to give them back their uniqueness as real subjects. In the case of survivors who experienced terror, we also want to restore their place as subjects and not only objects of terror. Another aim has been to tell the story of the constant struggle by human rights' organizations and various groups of civil society for truth and justice.

Our interviews with the children of vanished persons deserve mention separately. We have tried to retrieve the specific problems they face, from the extreme cases of children born in captivity, taken away by repressors and later returned to their biological families to those children who went through the trauma of witnessing their parents' capture. We have not conducted, up to now, a significant number of interviews with children whose parents disappeared. But they undoubtedly represent the views of another generation, having suffered in their own flesh the consequences of State terrorism in our country and who will add a rich vein to the material we have gathered.

To agree to be interviewed demands more than time to spare. We know it is a difficult decision. The interval between agreeing and the actual interview date may be filled with anxiety and anguish. Many who had agreed changed their minds in that time. Interviewees often start nervously and only gradually acquire confidence. We have ascertained that meeting prior to an interview and

a clear and frank explanation of the nature of the project, its institutional character and its goals made interviewees less apprehensive.

We have to insist: anxiety and anguish come not only from reliving traumatic experiences but also from uncertainty about the outcome and ulterior uses of the interview. For this reason a few came to the interview armed with a written text they meant to read. Most did accept the challenge of speaking spontaneously about matters they had not previously thought about. In some cases the difficulty stemmed from interviewing people who had been interviewed before and finding it hard to go beyond the testimonial-discourse or deposition-discourse.

These issues make evident that oral histories simultaneously open possibilities for reaffirming and destabilizing personal narratives. The experience was liberating to some interviewees but others were left deeply disturbed or at least disconcerted. Interviews, no doubt, lift the lid on the past, remove wounds lying beyond consciousness and force reflection on them. There are even more risks when inquiring about painful and traumatic facts. Furthermore, work done elsewhere has posed questions about differentiated and sometimes impossible access to past or present traumatic experiences.⁴ Trauma may produce a rupture in memory, causing a breakdown of continuity with the past. The events may be repressed or denied and registered only after a latent period. They will be processed through different forms and stereotypes assimilated and elaborated in the course of a lifetime. Memory is then secondary, in so far as what happened is not easily integrated into experience or directly remembered, and reconstruction will proceed through aftereffects and scars.⁵ A direct witness, in this way, finds it impossible to reach fully into such experiences, much more so indirect witnesses.

General considerations on the interviews collected

Those interviewed expressed a high level of awareness about the fundamental importance of interviews as historical sources and of memory as historical heritage needing to be preserved. Even though our interviews fall within a relatively homogenous universe, each history evinces a particular way of thinking about and narrating lived experience. Almost all stories show the present prevalence of traumatic situations.

The stories are imprecise at times but their quality as sources is not diminished. The speakers could not always carefully build their stories. On the contrary, their narratives highlight the emotional difficulties to tell and live with memories that are daily questioning the construction of self. Mistakes, lapses, subtle alterations, silences—all reveal how memory works around a central, and in some way uncontrollable, nucleus to establish dominance over the traumatic situation. Bigger alterations correspond to more traumatic moments.

Interviews bring forth unprocessed past matters and the interviewee thinks as he or she speaks of experiences defying rational explanation, of mourning resistant to closure. To remember and tell produces anguish because it implies somehow reliving painful episodes. Even quite articulate and seemingly emotionless witnesses suddenly felt anguished without knowing why, even when asked innocuous questions. Common signs have been crying, faltering speech or silence. We exerted every effort not to pry morbidly into traumatic episodes and respect the limits set by our interviewees.

Repressors occupy a depersonalized place in our universe. There is talk of State terrorism, detention centers, concentration camps or genocide

to refer symbolically to repression in general. Repression appears as a system, in contrast to the specific case of a kidnapped, tortured, jailed or vanished "victim". Individuals engaged in repression do not appear, except in a few stories. Some have mentioned the importance of including the repressors in this kind of collection. No doubt the point merits a thoughtful discussion as to its convenience.

The different contexts in which the story is retold are crucial for the nature of memory, since they shape the narrative. The fact that our interviewees know their testimonies will be included in the State Terrorism in Argentina Collection, and will be open to public consultation, undoubtedly has consequences upon the type of narrative produced. There is always a social context conditioning the reconstruction of even the most private memories. There is also an important distinction between the social space where trauma occurred and the present space in which it is remembered. A potentially comforting space to speak emerges when a whole community, or at least a substantial part of it, shares traumas.⁶

In the case of survivors, I think quite adequate the distinction made in some studies of the Holocaust concerning two memory operations. Charlotte Delbo speaks of herself in the present, living under the control of what she calls common memory, and of herself then, her Auschwitz being, living under the dominion of deep memory. Common memory allows her to look at Auschwitz as part of a chronology, a dissociated event in the past, and frees her from the pain of remembering what is unthinkable and incomprehensible. "I am lucky", says Delbo, "to not recognize myself in the person I was there, I feel that person was not me, she is not the person who is here now, writing". And yet she recognizes how deep memory

reminds her that Auschwitz is not in the past and never will be, that in the end both memories are contaminated. Many of our interviewees tell of a similar process.

The interviewer's role

Interviews of this kind are not easy for the interviewer either. He or she becomes a participant and in a way, some say, a co-owner of the traumatic episode.⁷

Witnesses in some instances have a stock of resources to attain distance from their own stories, enabling them to preserve themselves without falling into self-pity. Their stories many times are surprising because of the apparent dissociation. We quite frequently find sentences like "It seems that what I'm telling happened to somebody else, not me" or "I still cannot believe that it could happen". Of course there were interviewees who for the first time talked about taboo subjects and could not handle the flood of emotions brought forth by it. Narratives of trauma are complex cultural constructions that mix historical and personal memories. Some experiences are beyond words. This means there are memories that may never be retrieved, setting a clear limit to the reach of our methodology. We come not against the limits of memory but against the limits of language, to how inadequate words are to express lived experience.

The interviewer is instead overwhelmed and shocked as he or she listens for the first time to the tragedy in some of these stories. But it is a must in all cases to maintain a prudent distance and carefully handle reactions, notwithstanding how tense and hard this may be.

The interviewer runs an equal risk if he or she listens to stories involving a great deal of suffering without emotion or with a seemingly inappropriate attitude. The interviewer will certainly experience emotional reactions to certain passages and, consequently, will have to handle them without disrupting the interview. The issue demands permanent attention, as it is necessary to also deal with the psychological costs incurred by those who interview.⁸ Those who work with this kind of witnesses need, besides an adequate technique, to have personal and institutional spaces for reflection, processing and containment in order to adequately carry out our work. The interviewer will face ethical issues as well: how far to go in asking questions despite evident discomfort in answering them? To shift trauma from the private to the public sphere, indeed one of the main gains from oral history in this case, continuously warns about the need to proceed with caution and respect.

I want to underline, lastly, that all interviews reveal as much of the emotions of the interviewer as of the interviewee. Interviewers were constantly advised not to interfere with the interviewee's talk and maintain a neutral attitude, but we know that the sole presence of the interviewer and how and what he or she asks orient and influence the answers. Both actively create the oral source as they interact emotionally and intellectually, so the final product reflects the interests of each and the dynamics of their relationship. A project of this nature, for this reason, requires clear definition of objectives and parameters that recognize how the mutual trust essential to the quality of the narration builds out of sensitivity and respect toward the interviewee.

Methodological and technical challenges

This type of work, which is certainly more than just recording oral sources is, nevertheless neither an oral history nor a history based in oral sources. Even though individuals have produced and used oral sources for researching the period, and books of uneven quality have been published, those sources remain stacked in desk drawers and are inaccessible to others. Besides, many of these sources do not meet basic requirements in methodological and technical quality.⁹ The Open Memory Oral Collection is in this sense the first project of this nature to be carried out in Argentina. As we have already said, the objective has been precisely to create a collection on a topic relevant to contemporary Argentine society where, independently of extant written documents, oral sources offer a rich and unique vision.

Any archives, including oral collections, should pursue two fundamental objectives: to preserve documents and to ensure access to them. This is not an easy goal to fulfill. What sources to collect or select, how to balance maximum preservation with maximum access, these are large questions for today's archives, facing a greater demand for transparency in information.

Finally and briefly, I want to refer to practical and technical criteria established to facilitate preservation, classification, and access to the oral sources created. There is a consensus that paper is better than other physical supports, given the quick obsolescence of high-tech media. Besides, most oral collections have found users prefer reading transcriptions. And in this case the interview will be kept in its original physical form, for which we set basic principles of audio and visual quality. Bad audio and ill-defined images are often

the result of poor equipment or lack of training in available technology. We also fixed criteria about how documents should be identified. Digital cassettes had to carry all elements required for identification and have attached a copy of the rights' release forms (from interviewee and interviewer) before entering the collection.

It is important to take note that new technologies have transformed and expanded means for creation of oral sources and for presenting them as "public history". New ethical and legal problems have risen, concerning intellectual property, protection of privacy and access limitations for sources of enormous historical value. The growth of Internet presents the greatest risk, as it poses a serious challenge to have oral sources freely navigating and being subject to uncontrolled copying, use and abuse.¹⁰

Epilogue

Charlotte Delbo presents a perhaps different perspective.¹¹ She set out to reveal to the readers of her book, *La mémoire et les jours*, "what really happened" and her struggle, and that of her friends, to stay alive despite hunger, vexations and despair. But how to explain to herself and to others the inexplicable experience of living through Auschwitz and surviving? Just like Primo Levi did, through the 40 years after Auschwitz she tried to put her experiences into words. Using the metaphor of the snake that changes her hard and wrinkled skin for a new one, shiny and soft, Delbo tells of how she left the camp with a hardened outer skin. She thought she could quickly leave the wrinkles behind. But the process went slowly and took longer than it takes the snake. The human ritual of renovation means relearning habits from previous

life, things like brushing one's teeth, using toilet paper, smiling, remembering smells. Delbo realizes that her skin change took many years. But, as is case with the snake, it is only a change in appearance. She thinks there are not only different levels of memory but also a skin around memory, a resistant peel that does not change, a mark whose impact is beyond control. Its strength is felt notwithstanding the passing of time.¹²

She then recognizes that against her wishes and despite the hardened case covering the memory of Auschwitz, her deep memory reappears when least expected, in her dreams for instance. She may then see and feel as she saw and felt, as she lived that huge mass of suffering.

Those are the questions posed to an historian facing the problem of differential access, sometimes impossible, to traumatic experiences of the past and the present.

Notes

* Dora Schwarzstein died on November 6, 2002. She was Director of the Oral History Program at the University of Buenos Aires. She read the present paper at a round table on "Testimony and Memory", First Meeting of the Mem-

ory Studies Group, Instituto de Desarrollo Económico y Social, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 8-9 August 2002.

¹ Dora Schwarzstein, "Oral history around the world: present and future perspectives", *Comma. International Journal on Archives*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2002, pp. 177-189.

² Charlotte Delbo, *La mémoire et les jours*, Paris, Berg International, 1985.

³ Raphael Samuel y Paul Thompson (eds.), *The myths we live by*, London, Routledge, 1990, pp. 1-21.

⁴ Dora Schwarzstein, "Historia oral, memoria e historias traumáticas", *Historia Oral*, no. 4, 2001, pp. 73-85.

⁵ Dominick LaCapra, *History and memory after Auschwitz*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1998, pp. 8-10, 21.

⁶ Lawrence J. Kirmayer, "Landscapes of memory. Trauma, narrative and dissociation" in *Tense past. Cultural essays in trauma and memory*, Paul Antze and Michael Lambek (eds.), New York, Routledge, 1996, pp. 189-190.

⁷ Mark T. Klemptner, "Llevar a buen término entrevistas biográficas con supervivientes de un trauma", *Historia, Antropología y Fuentes Orales*, no. 23, 2000, pp. 136-147.

⁸ Wendy Rickard, "Historia, trauma y tabú", *Historia, Antropología y Fuentes Orales*, no. 23, 2000, p. 123.

⁹ We have in mind the standards set by the Oral History Association in the United States. See Donald Ritchie (ed.), *Oral History Evaluation Guidelines*, Los Angeles, Oral History Association, 1992.

¹⁰ Dora Schwarzstein, "Oral history", *op. cit.*

¹¹ Charlotte Delbo, *Mémoire*, *op. cit.*

¹² Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust testimonies. The ruins of memory*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1991.