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Between Past and Future: Oral History, Memory  
and Meaning

Entre el Pasado y el Futuro: Comprensión de la  
Historia y Memoria Oral



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**XVI INTERNATIONAL ORAL HISTORY CONFERENCE**

**“Between Past and Future: Oral History, Memory and Meaning”**

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**Language of Presentation:** English

**I am not member of IOHA or COHA**

**Necessary Equipment:** nothing special, only a normal microphone

**Sub-theme:** 12. Methodological, archival and technological issues

Theory and Method in Oral History: Legal and ethical issues

## **Title of the paper in English:**

### **Interviewing people who have suffered serious traumas: experience with Shoah survivors**

**Abstract in English:** The paper will analyze the role and the methodology of Oral History in contexts where people suffered big traumas, also under totalitaristic regimes, as during the Shoah. I want to examine several points of view, with the purpose to find and make meaning of the past and human identity through Oral History, understanding not only of our past but our lives in general. There will be an introduction to the Oral History in Italy, I will deal with the connection between oral sources and Jewish tradition, and the general methodology of the interview, subjects which prepare the issue I want to analyze: the oral sources of people who suffered a big trauma, from my experience of interviewer of Shoah survivors.

The sections of the paper will be:

1. Introduction: the role of oral sources in the historical reconstruction with particular reference to Italy (a brief history of the role of oral sources in historical researches in Italy, the reasons why they are important and why they can be a problem in the reconstruction of history...)
2. the connection between oral sources and Jewish tradition (hints about the importance of memory in the Jewish tradition – Bible, philosophy –, why the oral sources are important in Jewish history...)
3. the methodology and the problems of the interview in Oral History (the preparation of the interviewer, the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewed, the role of the interviewer, how to prepare the questions, how to conduct the interview, how to avoid the memory errors...)
4. the methodology of the interview of a person who suffered a big trauma (how to approach him/her, how to conduct the interview, the problems during the interview, how to write an interview from a tape, legal and ethical issues...)

## **Title of the paper in Spanish:**

### **Entrevistar a personas que sufrieron fuertes traumas:**

#### **la experiencia con los sobrevivientes de la Shoah**

**Abstract in Spanish:** El estudio pretende analizar el papel y la metodología de la Historia Oral en contextos donde las personas han sufrido fuertes traumas, por ejemplo bajo regímenes totalitarios, como durante la Shoah. Me propongo examinar diferentes puntos de vista, con el intento de encontrar un sentido al pasado y a la identidad humana a través de la Historia Oral, no solamente para comprender nuestro pasado sino nuestras vidas en general. El ensayo se abrirá con una introducción acerca de la Historia Oral en Italia, trataré en seguida de la relación entre las fuentes orales y de la tradición judía y de la metodología de las entrevistas, materias todas necesarias para abordar la cuestión que quiero analizar: las fuentes orales producidas por personas que han sufrido fuertes traumas, por medio de mi experiencia en las entrevistas de los sobrevivientes de la Shoah.

El estudio se organizará en las siguientes secciones:

1. Introducción: el papel de las fuentes orales en las reconstrucciones históricas con particular atención a la situación italiana (una breve historia del papel de las fuentes orales en las investigaciones históricas en Italia, las razones de su importancia y de las dificultades que se encuentran en la reconstrucción histórica ...).
2. La relación entre las fuentes orales y la tradición judía (esbozos acerca de la significación de la memoria en la tradición judía – Torah, filosofía –, la razón de la importancia de las fuentes orales en la historia judía ...)
3. La metodología y los problemas de las entrevistas en la Historia Oral (la preparación de las entrevistas, la relación entre el entrevistador y el entrevistado, el papel del entrevistador, la forma de preparar las preguntas, la manera de conducir la entrevista, los instrumentos para evitar los errores de memoria ...).
4. La metodología que se aplica para entrevistar una persona que ha sufrido un fuerte trauma (la forma de acercarse a ella, la manera de conducir la conversación, los problemas que pueden surgir durante la entrevista, la metodología para pasar la información de una grabación, cuestiones éticas y legales ...).

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## Introduction

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## Introduction

The subject addressed in this paper is complex, and it cannot be covered exhaustively here, sad to say. The purpose that the paper sets out to achieve is to present a number of crucial factors concerning oral sources for consideration and discussion, attempting to highlight, in what will necessarily be a summary, and at times unavoidably didactic manner, the salient features of the interview with people who have suffered serious traumas, such as Shoah survivors. This presentation aims to contribute to the debate on the methodological and ethical issues bound up with the topic, which are still open and might benefit from fresh stimuli and ideas.

### 1. Oral sources and history

#### 1.1 History and memory, the educational value of the oral source, its reliability

“Oral history can be defined as recorded interviews that preserve historically significant memories for future use, but an oral historian can be defined as a person who uses all kinds of materials, in addition to recording spoken memories, to document and explain the past”<sup>1</sup>. This definition highlights the close, often problematic, bond between oral source and historical reconstruction. There has been lively debate between the historians and the collectors of eye-witness accounts, concluding, in some cases, that the oral source performed the mere role of history’s “handmaid.” Gabriele De Rosa has asserted, in this connection: “There is no denying that the historian, too, has now resorted to interviewing as part of his work... [It] is not, therefore, the stock in trade of the anthropologist and the sociologist alone, but of the historian as well, albeit with a difference that I see as crucial, which is that the interview is the main component, often the crux, of the anthropologist’s or sociologist’s work, in particular when recorded as an oral document as well, whereas the historian, even the historian of the contemporary era, still gives priority to the bibliographical and archival source: the interview is

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<sup>1</sup> T.L. Charlton, L.E. Myers, R. Sharpless (2007), p. 165.

chiefly a complementary source; it carries adjectival weight and can enhance, broaden and add to the historical account, but it is no substitute for the document and the archive”<sup>2</sup>. During the Nuremberg trial as well, eye-witness evidence was used as “corroboration” of what had emerged from archival research, in which connection Annette Wievorka has written: “The witnesses had not been called to tell their tale, to move the judges or the public sitting in the courtroom, but primarily to confirm, comment and elaborate on the content of the paperwork. The Nuremberg Trials marked the triumph of the written over the spoken word”<sup>3</sup>.

The oral source scene is, obviously, somewhat complex; indeed, the oral source has, in some cases, “accompanied” historical research, nonetheless succeeding in contributing elements that would not otherwise have emerged from the study of the documentation<sup>4</sup>. In others, the importance of the oral source has been crucial, as it has proved the sole resource providing an understanding of a historical fact<sup>5</sup>. The most balanced approach is probably not to set the two sciences up against one another, but to grasp the indissoluble bond uniting them. In this respect, Aleida Assmann has written: “Memory is history’s complement, and history corrects memory. Academic history writing depends on memory for oral accounts and first-hand experience, and for significance and importance criteria as well; conversely, memory depends on history for proving the sources true or false. This is why it is important not to set the two terms up against one another, but to keep them distinct, so as to be able to analyse the various forms of their mutual interaction”<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> G. De Rosa (1986), pp. 125-126.

<sup>3</sup> A. Wievorka (1999), p. 82.

<sup>4</sup> “Memory is seen as a form of subjectivity, indeed, a primary form, the historians’ highway towards the topic of the subject” (L. Passerini (2003), p. 19). “Oral history takes us back to the particular, the concrete, the local and the ways in which people see their own place in history; to how they relate their personal experiences to their idea of the laws of the institutions, the value systems and the cultures of the societies in which they live” (R. Grele (2007), p. XIV). “Eye-witness accounts give us precisely what we cannot obtain from the historical account founded on archive analyses, because the immediacy of first-hand accounts lights a fire in the cold room that is history” (G. Hartman (1994), p. 68).

<sup>5</sup> “Oral history interviews are superb opportunities for documenting matters of historical significance that are not documented elsewhere” (T.L. Charlton, L.E. Myers, R. Sharpless (2007), p. 183).

<sup>6</sup> A. Assmann (2010). “Remembering, setting the memory in motion, is a chore, and as such it is split up, contradictory, often partial and subject to circumstances; it is an exercise influenced by culture and ideology, and the relationship between individual memory and what is referred to as the ‘collective memory’ is equally complex and requires the drawing of distinctions between institutional, community and personal memory, which may be seen in turn in symbolic, psychological and formal terms. The interaction between history and memory is a fact of life in the world, in time and in society: it is a fact of culture” (R. Grele (2007), p. XIII). “An interview is a dialogue, and dialogue as a literary genre, although few remember the fact, was born precisely when history writing was born, because the first book of Herodotus’ Histories features a dialogue between Croesus and Solon on the happiness of mankind. About 80 years ahead of the Dialogues by Plato, the father of historiography, Herodotus had identified dialogue as a tool of historical knowledge... it might be said that Plato’s Dialogues are the very historical archetype of the interview as we understand it, meaning asking and answering questions; Socratic questioning is neither more nor less than an interview: we question and question ourselves to find out the truth, at the same time emphasising the value of the spoken as opposed to the written word. Indeed, we know that, in the Phaedrus, Plato himself states that the writer’s business is child’s play compared with the serious nature of dialectic dialogue. Socrates explains in the Phaedrus that written discourse is but a copy of living oral colloquy and that, whereas writing numbs the memory, oral communication quickens it, salvaging it from oblivion. So oral communication, dialogue and colloquy are history, history in the act of its being made” (L. Villari (1986), p. 121). “Ronald Grele (*Envelopes of Sound. The Art of Oral History*, Chicago, 1985) thoroughly probed the uniqueness of oral history as research that generates its own documents and the interviewing process as a distillate of complexity that combines the play of memory, the inter-subjective relationship, awareness and political attitude all in one. However, oral history is not only the production of oral sources by the recorded interview method. Oral history can also be a form of new history in which the historian places the dialogues (or historical conversations or conversational narrations, as Grele calls them) in the requisite interpretative context and, by way of explaining what has been said, explicates the guiding thread made up of imagination, critical spirit and historical knowledge on the basis of which he or she has conducted the interviews” (M.G. Melchionni (1986), p. 137). “Unlike the bulk of the documents of which historical research avails itself, oral sources are not turned up by the historian, but built up in his or her presence, with the latter’s direct, decisive involvement. It is an interpersonal source, in which communication takes the form of glances (inter-view), questions and answers, not necessarily all in the same direction. It is thus a process of verbal communication” (E. Novello (2008), p. 107). See also G. Contini (2008b), p. 41-42; C. Guazzaroni (1986), p. 133; L. Passerini (2003), p. 19; A. Rossi-Doria (1998), p. 5-6; B.W. Sommer, M. Kay Quinlan (2002), p. 5.

Not only are oral sources important in historical reconstructions, but they often constitute, in themselves, a fundamental factor for the handing down and perception of history. Indeed, using them has considerable educational value as a meaningful, highly effective vehicle for the dissemination of our past: “Oral history performs a crucial educational role...” Alessandro Portelli has stressed. “History is often seen, in traditional classroom contexts, as a pointless, abstract subject dealing with the dead past and people who are no more. Oral history helps convey the feeling that history happens to people like ourselves, men in the street, in familiar, day-to-day contexts, thus very definitely and tangibly shaping our future lives and our experience”<sup>7</sup>.

It is obvious that, if it is to perform the historical and educational role assigned to it, the oral source has to be deemed reliable<sup>8</sup>. The issue has been surrounded by great debate, and Alessandro Portelli has given an interpretation fundamental to the overall consideration of the oral source, asserting that even the errors inherent in it make a major contribution to the historical and social reconstruction of events: “Discrepancies between fact and memory cannot, therefore, be attributed to deterioration of the memory, to the time that has elapsed, or maybe to the advancing years of some of the narrators. They are actually products of the active working of collective memory, of coherent procedures that organise basic tendencies already to be found even in the written sources contemporary with the events. We may add a final observation: we would know far less about the sense of the event in question had the oral sources reported it accurately and ‘truthfully.’ Even more than the event as such, the prime historical fact is the very memory of it”<sup>9</sup>.

## 1.2 Oral sources in Italy

The beginnings of oral history date back to the 19th century, when the first early magnetic recording device, called the ‘telegraphone,’ was made and introduced by the Danish physicist, Valdemar Poulsen<sup>10</sup>. Ethnologists and folklorists were the first to use equipment to make field recordings. Indeed, at the end of the 19th century, ethnologists began recording the music of native Americans using wax cylinders or discs (hard wax surfaces into which sound grooves were cut)<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> A. Portelli (2006), p. 15-16. See also A. Portelli (2007), p. 349-350.

<sup>8</sup> In this connection, Marc Bloch (1994), p. 80, cited by Annette Wievorka, wrote: “There is no such thing as a good witness, or evidence precise in every detail” (A. Wievorka (1999), p. 14). Raimondo Luraghi, one of the great Italian oral historians, explained that he had needed to select over 100 witnesses for his work and urged colleagues never to settle for a single witness to establish a given circumstance, but to question as many as possible, because “it is incredible how many tricks memory plays on people,” and recommended “letting the witness talk without bothering him with too many questions that break the train of thought; questions must be asked in such a way that they prod the memory, not get in its way. While the interviewee is speaking, it is as well not just to jot down the odd note, but to draw up a proper summary of his statements, then read it over and correct it together. The subsequent step is to collate the statements made by several witnesses on the same topic against one another and against the documents, if any exist: a series of discrepancies will not take long to emerge. The witnesses must then be patiently questioned for the second, and even third time until the various circumstances have been fully clarified, leaving no room for misapprehensions. This is the case unless all the elements supplied by the various witnesses and the documents immediately fit perfectly with one another, like the pieces of a mosaic, but this is only rarely the case” (R. Nuraghi (1953), p. 305-306).

<sup>9</sup> A. Portelli (2008), p. 91. See also *ibid.*, p. 62. “This means that the reliability of oral sources is a *different* form of reliability. The evidence’s interest lies not only in its adherence to the facts, but also in its *departure* from them, because imagination, the symbolic and desire work their way into the gap. There is therefore no such thing as an “unreliable” oral source” (A. Portelli (2007), p. 13). See also *ibid.*, p. 381; W. Benjamin (1873), p. 28; T. L. Charlton, L.E. Myers, R. Sharpless (2007), pp. 48-49; G. Contini (2008b), p. 50; A. Portelli (2007), p. 12; B.W. Sommer, M. Kay Quinlan (2002), p. 1; A. Stille (2008), p. 177-179.

<sup>10</sup> C. Stokes Brown (1988), p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> B.W. Sommer, M. Kay Quinlan (2002), p. 33.

Oral history, in the sense of eye-witness accounts of events<sup>12</sup> otherwise recounted only by the official chronicles, actually began to be used in Italy in the thirties, as labour movement history. It is not easy to draw a picture of the whole array of institutions, small groups, literary experimentation workshops and individuals who conducted research based on oral sources and their methodologies, as the method was initially underrated, deemed unreliable and hence of lesser importance than the predominant written history tradition<sup>13</sup>. Since the 1940s, however, the practice of oral history has been relatively unified in the western academic world, with a high level of agreement on basic matters<sup>14</sup>.

“The first recorder was called a magnetophone and was developed in Germany between World War I and World War II. The wire recorder, which used steel tape or wire as the recording medium, was developed in the United States in 1939... In 1944, Sgt. Forrest Pogue of the U.S. Army’s Historical Division used them to record accounts of the D-Day invasion. Shortly after World War II, Allan Nevins of Columbia University used them on an oral history project collecting information about prominent New Yorkers”<sup>15</sup>, and, in 1948, he founded the Oral History Office<sup>16</sup>.

Various figures who used oral sources in their work on the resistance, the class struggle and the peasant world emerged in Italy in the fifties and sixties. They included Mario Alicata, Roberto Battaglia, Gianni Bosio, Ernesto de Martino, Raimondo Luraghi, Danilo Montaldi, Raniero Panzieri, Nuto Revelli, Carlo Salinari, Rocco Scotellaro, Mario Spinella and Palmiro Togliatti<sup>17</sup>.

In other countries too, and in the United States in particular, the first organised groups began to form, focusing primarily on the civil rights (blacks, social outcasts) and feminist movements: the University of California at Berkeley created its Regional Oral History Office in 1954; the regents of the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) established the UCLA Oral History Program in 1959; the National Archives of the United States began formal oral history work through the presidential libraries, starting in 1961 with the Harry S. Truman Library, in Independence, Missouri, and expanding rapidly with the John F. Kennedy Library in 1964, the Herbert Hoover Oral History Program in 1965, and the Lyndon B. Johnson and Dwight D. Eisenhower projects beginning in 1967<sup>18</sup>.

After mainly addressing social issues, scholars of oral sources moved on, between the sixties and eighties, to covering cultural topics and, as we have already mentioned, they paused to analyse the interview not only as testimony of the past, but as the outcome of personal elaboration as well, examining in what way the past impacted on the life of the interviewee, and of the interviewer too<sup>19</sup>. The several groups that worked on oral

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<sup>12</sup> “The oral source, as the adjective suggests, consists in a verbal account given by the person asked to supply evidence in relation to a given event or particular topic, or to tell his or her own story, within the sphere of a specific research project. In actual fact, it covers a broader category of sources – suffice it to consider the use made of it in anthropology and studies of folk traditions – but people’s testimony, in the broadest sense, is predominant in historical research” (P. Crucci (2009), p. 42).

<sup>13</sup> C. Bermani (2008). One of the first books on oral sources, in 1930, was *Autobiografia* by Rinaldo Rigola.

<sup>14</sup> T.L. Charlton, L.E. Myers, R. Sharpless (2007), p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> B.W. Sommer, M. Kay Quinlan (2002), p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> A. Stille (2008), p. 178.

<sup>17</sup> C. Bermani (2008).

<sup>18</sup> T.L. Charlton, L.E. Myers, R. Sharpless (2007), p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> R. Grele (2007), p. IX.

history in Italy included the Canzoniere popolare, the Grass-Roots Culture Archive in Bergamo, the Circolo Gianni Bosio in Roma, the Micheletti Foundation, the Reggio Emilia and Turin groups, the Cerignola, Omegna and Rovereto groups, the Istituto de Martino, the Resistance History Institutes, the Piadena Culture League and Library and the Region of Lombardy's Department of Folk Culture<sup>20</sup>. Associations working with oral sources, which had by then been acknowledged as a major tool for historical reconstruction, continued to be formed in Italy after the eighties as well.

## 2. The connection between oral sources and Jewish tradition

“Memory is just the intersection between mind and matter,” Henri Bergson writes<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, what happens when we prepare to summon up a period in our history? “... We detach ourselves from the present to replace ourselves, first in the past in general, then in a particular region of the past... Little by little, it comes into view like a condensing nebulosity; from the virtual state it passes into the actual, and as its outlines become more distinct and its surface takes on colour, it tends to imitate perception. But it remains attached to the past by its deepest roots”<sup>22</sup>. The bond with the past has always been fundamental in Judaism, but not in the sense of looking backwards for its own sake; it is rather a matter of building one's own identity on a memory that bonds and forms the springboard for the leap into the future<sup>23</sup>. Indeed, the future exists for nobody who has no understanding of the past<sup>24</sup>: “A group that has not come to terms with its own history is like an individual who has not come to terms with his own ego; a group that rejects knowledge of the truth is like a man who cannot accept reality and takes refuge in the realm of fantasy. If events that have just been experienced are censored, if there is a lack of memory and awareness of what has been, both at the historical level and in terms of re-elaboration and ethical appraisal, it will be even easier to lose the memory and, hence, the teaching of them

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<sup>20</sup> C. Bermani (2008).

<sup>21</sup> H. Bergson (1982), p. 251.

<sup>22</sup> M.G. Melchionni (1986), p. 137.

<sup>23</sup> “‘We Jews are a community based on remembering. Our shared memory has kept us united and enabled us to survive,’ Martin Buber wrote in 1938” (R. Della Rocca (2007), p. 47). “A heritage whose scope increases over time and grows constantly, fuelled both by fresh events and by new messages and emotions, is handed down from generation to generation. Interpreting this verse of the Bible, the rabbinic literature asserts that memory, preserved from generation to generation, is the most powerful antidote to death, representing as it does a staunch determination, a will not to forsake the traces of what is already past and gone and has now disappeared from history. In Judaism, indeed, the past is not something that is done with and serves no purposes, but is a source of valuable help in coping with life” (R. Della Rocca (2007), p. 47-48).

<sup>24</sup> “As for the time dimension, this century has a specificity all its own regarding the processes of remembering and forgetting. In her short but close-packed book on the reconciliation between history and memory in the case of deportation, Anna Rossi Doria (1998) stresses that the 20th century was mostly a period of wiping out memory, one that prolonged the tendency to suppress the past, a tendency set in motion by the crisis of memory and experience that Walter Benjamin sees as typical of the modern era... any operation setting out to cancel memory cannot but also represent the endeavour to produce another series of memories so as to oust previous memories by force. Memory is, in many respects, a battlefield... As political scientist Pérez-Díaz has pointed out (*The Role of Civil and Uncivil Nationalism in the Making of Europe*, ASP, Research Paper 27 (b), Madrid 1999), there is a close bond between the formation of a ‘democratic public sphere’ and the memories of the individuals who create it: if the recollection of the past is oversimplified, it will produce ‘incomplete individuals’ lacking memory, and hence easy prey for totalitarian movements” (L. Passerini (2003), p. 29 and 37). “Persistently stripping the other side of its homeland and denying it visibility are means of exorcising evil typical of the generations that have played a leading role in victory. Be that as it may, depriving the enemy of status and ruling out any possibility of probing its experience and specific features make for a crisis of collective memory, frozen by the moods of the period into too many simplifications, which are insufficient to meet the new generations’ demand for knowledge” (F. Colombara (2008), p. 34).

from one generation to another”<sup>25</sup>. Not for nothing is the intergenerational relationship very important in Judaism: fathers have the duty to hand tradition down to their children, and grandparents to their grandchildren<sup>26</sup>, memory of past events thus being handed down through the centuries, but a fundamental requirement for this to come about is listening<sup>27</sup>, another crucial concept in Judaism. Indeed, one of the most important prayers is precisely: “Shemà Israel”, or “Hear, O Israel”; we build up our system of values, our identity and our future precisely through attentive, conscious listening: “Only in Israel, and not elsewhere, is the enjoinder to remember taken as a religious commandment issued to a whole people. Its echoes are to be heard more or less everywhere, but reach a thundering crescendo in *Deuteronomy* and the *Books of the Prophets*: ‘Remember the days of old, consider the years of many generations’ (*Deut.*, 32:7). ‘Remember these, O Jacob and Israel, for thou art my servant; I have formed thee: thou art my servant: O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of me’ (*Isaiah*, 44:21). ‘Remember what Amalek did unto thee’ (*Deut.*, 25:17). ‘O my people, remember now what Balak, king of Moab, consulted’ (*Micah*, 6:5). And, with emphatic insistence: ‘Remember that you were once a slave in Egypt...’<sup>28</sup>.

It is certainly no coincidence that Jewish religious writings divide into “written teaching<sup>29</sup>” and “oral teaching<sup>30</sup>”: oral transmission is thus a very important factor in Jewish tradition<sup>31</sup> and, in the recent past in particular, oral sources have proved a crucial component in the reconstruction of events from the historical point of view: the Shoah was an episode of destruction not only of innocent lives, but of memory as well. Whole families were wiped out, and their memory with them, and an incredible quantity of documents was destroyed, thus creating the conditions for induced collective amnesia. In many cases, the oral source has been

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<sup>25</sup> F. Tagliacozzo (1997). “If ‘public amnesia,’ extending to the private sphere as well, is imposed by the authorities, it can very often not happen without a sort of connivance on the part of those who, not being in a position of power, assent to and prolong the silence thrust upon them” (L. Passerini (2003), p. 33).

<sup>26</sup> See the Feast of *Pesach*, which commemorates the Jewish people’s exodus from Egypt. “So remembering is not mere recollection of a past event, as the chain whereby memory is handed on not only preserves the event itself, but reactivates it in an enhanced form, giving it a new lease of life whenever it is placed back in the circuit of narration and celebration. This constantly renewed relationship with time has enabled the Jewish people wandering in space, far from the Land of Israel, and from its Sanctuary in particular, to develop a profound *historical consciousness* and a strong sense of *collective memory*, thus creating a number of *provinces of holiness in time*, which may be observed and celebrated anywhere. It is the very observance of these ‘sanctuaries in time,’ as philosopher A.J. Heschel (1907-1972) calls them, that has enabled Judaism to save itself from extinction and not to be completely absorbed by the dominant cultures” (R. Della Rocca (2007), p. 48-49).

<sup>27</sup> “Hearing is basically a physiological phenomenon, whereas listening is a psychological act. Barthes notes all this with particular vividness. We may apply all the methodological rules with extreme, even obsessive precision, and do everything the demo-ethno-anthropological research methodology manuals say must be done with the utmost diligence, and hear nothing at all; we may listen, or rather think we are listening, and not hear, not see. Listening may be a mechanical lending of the ear; we may accurately record what we heard and, this notwithstanding, fall short of comprehension. The outcome of this mechanical lending an ear is short-sightedness, if not blindness, no less. Listening, as Carpitella has revealed, is not an operation separate from facial expression and quality of sound; and even the light given off by what is perceived contributes to fully rounded reception” (L. Lombardi Satriani (1986), p. 83).

<sup>28</sup> Y.H. Yerushalmi (1983), p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> The *Torah*, in Hebrew, “Teaching,” in other words, the five books of the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy).

<sup>30</sup> The commentary on the *Torah*, the *Talmud*, in Hebrew, “Study.” It comprises the *Mishnah* (work written by Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi, known as the Prince, in the 2nd-3rd century CE, and dealing with Judaic legal tradition) and the commentary on it, the *Gemara*, plus glosses and additions made by 11th- and 12th-century Provencal rabbis. It addresses theological and moral topics, and folklore, medicine, astrology, proverbs and lives of rabbis as well. There are two *Talmudim*: the Jerusalem and Babylon versions; whereas the *Mishnah* they contain is the same, the *Gemara* is different.

<sup>31</sup> “The verb *zachar*, in its various forms, recurs no less than 222 times in the Bible, in the majority of cases having either Israel or God as its subject. Indeed, it is incumbent on them both to remember. The concept of remembering has its complement and

the only one that has enabled the historians to piece together the overall picture, thereby ensuring that the Nazis' destructive goals were not fully achieved.

### 3. Some remarks about the methodology of the interview and the ethical issue

“The interview process is an art, not a science... If one listens to Horowitz, Rubinstein, Argerich, and Guller playing a Chopin sonata, one will hear the same piece of music, but it will sound different with each pianist... The story will not necessary sound the same on any given day, with any given interviewer”<sup>32</sup>: these few words sum up the complexity of the interview in all its aspects, taking in the preparatory work put in beforehand, the rapport between the individuals involved and its conduct. The relationship between interviewee and interviewer is undoubtedly a complex type of bond<sup>33</sup>; in particular, the interviewer's role is highly critical, as the outcome of the interview depends on his or her attitude, on his or her manner<sup>34</sup>: “However, the secret of a good interview, be it verbal or written, short or long, is always the same: using all the weapons of your intelligence, your sensitivity, your education, and your craftiness and cunning as well, in other words every psychological nuance that goes into the art of winning someone over, to get to the interviewee's heart. In this respect, the interviewer is a seducer – I said so somewhere, and it's true – the interviewer has to be a sort of seducer of the person with whom he or she is dealing”<sup>35</sup>.

Indeed, the act of conducting an interview does not consist merely in putting an acquired set of methods into practice, but entails a series of fundamental ethical implications that are not always codified: “Legal and ethical considerations permeate the practice of oral history, from initial contact with a potential narrator to final disposition and use of an interview. They are so central because oral history is fundamentally grounded in a relationship between two people... The ethical concerns... are, accordingly, not fixed, but require the continuing attention of both the field and its individual practitioners”<sup>36</sup>.

The following is an attempt to summarise a number of fundamental points with which the interviewer is required to comply during an interview, meaning that he or she must:

- 1) be fully familiar with the subject addressed, both with a view to establishing a relationship of trust with the interviewee and for the purposes of identifying any lapses of memory;
- 2) have adequate preparation and familiarity with the equipment that he or she needs to use;
- 3) inform the interviewee clearly about the subject of the interview;

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completion in its opposite: *forgetting*. The Jewish people is urged to *remember*, at the same time also being instructed *not to forget*. The Torah, and in particular Deuteronomy 32: 7, repeatedly urges us to *remember* and *not to forget*” (R. Della Rocca (2007), p. 47).

<sup>32</sup> J. Ringelheim et al. (2009), p. VI-VII.

<sup>33</sup> “It has been argued that the interviewer's position must be that of an observer looking on from a distance, because too close a relationship can distort the interview's ‘objectivity,’ or because the experiences talked about are so traumatic and personal that they cannot be grasped by anyone who has not lived through them; on the other hand, it has been claimed that the relationship that emerges in the interview is so intense that the personalities end up by merging and becoming indistinguishable, in a sphere of empathy and compassion” (R. Grele (2007), p. XI).

<sup>34</sup> “If your question does not result in an interesting answer, it probably wasn't a good question and needs to be followed up with more questions” (C. Stokes Brown (1988), p. 36).

<sup>35</sup> G. Minà (1986), pp. 64-65.

<sup>36</sup> T.L. Charlton, L.E. Myers, R. Sharpless (2007), pp. 154-155.

- 4) remember to keep the interview settings as comfortable as possible so as to put the interviewee at his or her ease in every respect<sup>37</sup>, and, also, look carefully for noise sources;
- 5) take a little time with the narrator to talk and relax before beginning;
- 6) be sensitive to the diversity of the narrator and his perspectives;
- 7) refrain from making promises that can't be fulfilled;
- 8) ask only one question at a time, rely on open-ended questions and use neutral, not leading, questions<sup>38</sup>. Some of the questions might be painful or discomfoting to the narrator; some aspects of his life will be difficult to discuss, so, maybe it is better to wait until the interviewer and the narrator know each other better before bringing them up. It is important to exercise one's own judgment about asking personal, sensitive questions that explore fears, mistakes, losses, unhappy events<sup>39</sup>;
- 9) use body language and eye contact to encourage the narrator's responses;
- 10) use a notebook to keep track of follow-up questions, additional points to make, or other interview needs;
- 11) listen carefully without interrupting the narrator and watch for hints (if the narrator insists on telling a rehearsed story, listen politely and let him finish. Then go back and ask additional questions);
- 12) use information identified though background and narrator-specific research to help facilitate a smooth interview, use the list of names and dates as necessary to help the narrator put events in context and remember to ask for specifics of place names, names of people, and dates or context;
- 13) keep track of the time to make sure not to extend the interview past a reasonable limit;
- 14) maintain the highest professional standards in preserving the oral history interviews and making them available to others;
- 15) assure that the narrator and interviewer properly sign the donor forms at the conclusion of each interview session<sup>40</sup>;
- 16) take a photograph of the narrator in the interview setting;
- 17) don't expect to be able to complete an interview in just one visit; plan to come back at least a second time<sup>41</sup>;
- 18) share rewards and recognition that come to an oral history project with narrators and their communities<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> M. Chamberlain (1985), pp. 163-72.

<sup>38</sup> "The interviewer guides the interview, but does not direct it. The interviewer is a facilitator of the interview, but does not manipulate it" (J. Ringelheim et al. (2009), p. VII-VIII). "This is the first degree of ambiguity: the questioner thinks one thing and the answerer thinks another... But there is a second type of ambiguity that is more radical, and which hinges on the question itself, as a heuristic tool. An interview need not necessarily call to mind precisely framed questions; in some types of research, life stories, for instance, the variable at work is not the specific thing asked, but rather the fact that the very subject of the story takes up the tale; so it is not necessary to ask specific questions, but rather to trigger a process of giving evidence, in which the interviewer can intervene as required to ask for individual particulars" (G.R. Cardona (1986), p. 112). See also A. Portelli (2007), pp. 17-18, 59-60.

<sup>39</sup> J. Ringelheim et al. (2009), p. VIII.

<sup>40</sup> "As far as the processing of personal data in the oral sources sphere is concerned, the *Code of Ethics* requires that interviewees should have explicitly given their consent, even in verbal form and, where possible, on the basis of a specified memorandum stating at least the interviewer's name and business and the purposes for which the data are being recorded. A public or private archive that purchases oral sources must take steps to obtain from the interviewer a written statement certifying that the interviewees were informed of the purposes of the investigation and gave their consent" (P. Carucci, M. Guercio (2009), p. 171).

<sup>41</sup> "Precisely because it is oral, the narration will never be the same twice running... It may, therefore, be worthwhile to repeat an interview with the same person after a while... The usefulness of repeating interviews raises the issue of the partial nature of oral sources. Indeed, it will never be possible to exhaust the *whole* of a person's historical memory, so the outcome will always be the fruit of a selection produced by the relationship that has been established... research carried out using oral sources is always work in progress, never complete, and this marks it out from the ideal requisite of historical research" (A. Portelli (2007), p. 18).

<sup>42</sup> B.W. Sommer, M. Kay Quinlan (2002), p. 14-18, 63 and 68-69-70; C. Stokes Brown (1988), p. 42-43.

Another major aspect of the interview process is transcription, which is certainly no substitute for recording: both are major components with oral sources, so they must be preserved and made accessible to the public<sup>43</sup>. As far as the transcription methodology is concerned, it is as well to bear it in mind that “the best person to do the transcribing and the editing is the interviewer... he must try to be accurate as to the information that was related, to use the words that the narrator used, and to catch as closely as possible the flavour and feeling of the speaker... One modification that is not acceptable is to ‘improve’ on the choice of words or the word order of the narrator. There may be a better word to express the concept... or the word order may be curious, perhaps because the narrator is a foreign-born, but that is the essence of the narrator’s individuality and it should not be tampered with”<sup>44</sup>.

#### **4. People who have suffered a serious trauma as oral sources. The interview: methodological and ethical issues**

The specific features of the interview depend on the subjects addressed, as, indeed, Marco Coslovich has written: “As far as factory workers are concerned, we encounter a continuity represented by the factory and by job content linked to a broader, multifaceted social ecosystem. Research among the survivors of German concentration camps presents very different features. The Lagers present us with a precise, distinct break with any previous social and political system and values and largely, but not wholly, with what followed, at least for the survivors. In this case, history, the political history of Hitler invading Poland, unleashing war and organising the death camps, burst in on the continuity and flow of social history and rooted out its habits and customs”<sup>45</sup>. Coslovich broaches one of the specific aspects of interviewing Shoah survivors here, highlighting the difficulty of describing facts that fall outside the categories to which we are accustomed. Both interviewer and interviewee are absolutely incapable of communicating or comprehending concepts for which no appropriate definition exists. For instance, when we talk about “hunger” or “thirst,” a lack of food or water that is nevertheless limited in time springs to the vast majority of people’s minds. When a former deportee talks about such concepts, he or she is referring to a situation in which people spent many months “eating” nothing but a thin gruel while at the same time performing work that took a heavy physical toll and burned a lot of calories and living in cotton trousers and vests in the Polish winter, which is long and bitterly cold. A former deportee who talks about “cold” and “hunger” is by no means referring to our concept of “cold” and “hunger,” and the paradox is that there are no other terms for describing that situation. It is already clear from this single example that interviewing former deportees presents specific features and problems quite different from other types of interview.

Another feature that sets it apart is the interviewing methodology. The general rules already mentioned undoubtedly apply, but such cases call for greater sensitivity, tact and understanding on the part of the

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<sup>43</sup> A. Portelli (2007), p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> W.K. Baum (1991), p. 25-26. See also A. Portelli (2007), p. 81; B.W. Sommer, M. Kay Quinlan (2002), p. 76; C. Stokes Brown (1988), p. 50-54.

<sup>45</sup> M. Coslovich (2008), p. 122.

interviewer, and skill at putting the interviewee at his or her ease and establishing the type of rapport crucial to drawing out answers to the most problematical questions. For instance, it is crucial for the interviewer to establish a good relationship of trust with the interviewee for the very reason that the interview will broach very sensitive topics; at times, it will be the first time the interviewee has ever told anyone about them, so while the relationship between questioner and narrator must obviously present no problems and be one of absolute trust in every type of interview, it is particularly the case when the talk is of serious traumas. It may be true that it is often easier for someone to tell a stranger stories that he or she would never have the courage to tell friends and relatives, but it is also true that the interviewer has to have a hefty dose of sensitivity and intuition to get people to open up and confide their memories, their very being, to someone who is a virtual stranger.

As has already been stressed, the interviewer must definitely not conduct the interview in an authoritarian manner, as this would jeopardise the spontaneity of the answers to the questions, which must always be open; however, when interviewing people who have suffered traumas, the interviewer often needs to steer the witness back to the original topic from which he or she has strayed after being allowed to speak freely. Indeed, “a history of events, directed at throwing light on changes, naturally focuses on the event that marks the start and the discovery of a new situation, whereas memory’s deceptive long span ousts chronology; in it, the most dramatic event is the one more likely to be selected than another event that merely occurred earlier”<sup>46</sup>. This virtually always happens with people who were deported during the Shoah: whenever the attempt is made to dig deeper into the period prior to or following arrest, the talk always reverts to that episode, the fact that obviously made an indelible mark on the person and entirely changed his or her existence. For that very reason, an interview conducted for historical ends cannot be completely free, thus marking it out from other types of interview<sup>47</sup>.

However, although it is true that the methods used to conduct an interview change according to the end in view, it is also true that contagion among the various types of interview is inevitable. Although each type of interview retains its own specific features, to which the methods have to adapt, one conducted for research purposes with someone who has suffered major traumas may, at times, stray into the sphere of psychology when the interviewee remembers and recounts events that he or she thought long forgotten or had never recounted before. Indeed, “the historian could not remain a contemplative presence, the interview process itself as an experience became a moment in the resolution of the conflicts over the past, or a moment in the revivification of the original emotions of powerlessness and victimization and all the attendant consequences of that re-emergence... Many of these projects [about traumas] resonated with issues raised by Holocaust interviews. First and foremost was the necessity and primacy of oral testimonies, given the distorted or nonexistent written record, which, if it did exist, by definition lacked any evidence of the extent and detail of the apparatus of oppression and its effects upon ordinary citizens, that is, the subjectivity of oppression. Second, such interviewing narrowed the gap between history and therapy as it documented the trauma of severe dislocations, such as torture or the disappearance of loved ones, and gave a new life to traumatic memories. As noted earlier,

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<sup>46</sup> A. Portelli (2007), p. 306.

<sup>47</sup> R. Misiti (1986), p. 94.

such questions were new for oral historians, and the consequences for the definition of the practice remain controversial to this day”<sup>48</sup>

Another particularly important issue in the topic of interviews with Shoah survivors is the reliability of memory, which can deceive at times, an argument used by the negationists in support of their abhorrent theses. There have been scholars who have emphasised this problem, claiming that oral sources were unreliable<sup>49</sup>, however, it is generally a matter of inaccuracies that definitely do not compromise the overall reliability of the interview and, here too, I consider that Alessandro Portelli’s aforementioned thesis holds good, and that the errors made by the interviewees may, themselves, provide material for case studies on the way the event was perceived and assimilated by the individual. In this respect, if the interviewer shows great responsibility in conducting the interview and ensuring that it is both spontaneous and broaches all the topics required for his or her research, including those most painful for and hard on the interviewee, the latter, too, has the duty to strive to give the most accurate account possible of his or her experience. Lidia Beccarla Rolfi, who told her story as a Ravensbrück survivor in her book, *L’esile filo della memoria. Ravensbrück, 1945: un drammatico ritorno alla libertà*, has laid down a sort of concise witness’s code of conduct, asserting that the witness must “never use hazy memories; not fill the voids in his or her account with material drawn from literature or other people’s accounts; keep events experienced or witnessed in person strictly separate in individual re-evocation and when relating them”<sup>50</sup>.

As has already been emphasised, the ethical issues that the conduct of the interview raises are legion and fundamental, but choosing the most proper approach is not always a simple matter. An emblematic example is provided by Claude Lanzmann, who has probably made the most significant documentary on the Shoah. His monumental, fundamental work remains an essential document for all scholars of the Shoah and oral sources, but it also raises an ethical problem to which there is no easy answer: “There is the example of filmmaker Claude Lanzmann, who exposed perpetrators of the Nazi holocaust by filming them with a hidden camera and then included their testimony in his epic film *Shoah*. Does the public’s right to hold war criminals accountable trump Lanzmann’s failure to secure their consent to the interview?”<sup>51</sup>. The debate remains open.

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<sup>48</sup> T.L. Charlton, L.E. Myers, R. Sharpless (2007), p. 42, 62.

<sup>49</sup> In this connection, Lucy Dawidowicz, cited by Annette Wievorka, has written: “The transcriptions of testimony (on the Shoah) that I have examined are full of errors about dates, people’s names and places and clearly display an incorrect understanding of the events themselves. Some of these statements may mislead, rather than proving useful to the scholar” (A. Wievorka (1999), p. 15).

<sup>50</sup> A.M. Buzzone (1997), p. 35.

<sup>51</sup> T.L. Charlton, L.E. Myers, R. Sharpless (2007), p. 131.

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