

Anna Andrisová, Adam Bartalský, Bc. Barbora Kopecká, Zuzana Poláková, Katharina Prietl,
Bc. Kateřina Sadílková

Advantages and disadvantages of oral history in the interpretation of topics on controversial history of the 20th century in the museums

Introduction “During the Second world war, when my grandfather was about 12 years old, his family owned a pub in a small town in eastern Slovakia. A main dance hall of the pub served as an accommodation for German soldiers, who slept, ate and drank there every day. At the same time, the back part of the pub was a secret place for the meetings of the partisan commanders. If those two groups - the Germans and the Partisans - had met, my family would have been probably killed.”

The introductory quote is a good example of the discussed topic – advantages and disadvantages of the oral history in the interpretation of topics on the controversial history of the 20th century in the museums. This story happened to a grandfather of one of the authors. Hence, this quote suggests that thanks to some witnesses, people can better understand the past epoch nowadays. These witnesses interpret history for us. But what exactly is the oral history? What is the real meaning of it? How it could be used in museums? These questions are focused in the course of this article.

This article is divided into five parts. The first part attempts to define the term “oral history”, its relation to museums and it tries to give a basic overview of the advantages and disadvantages of using oral history in museums. In the next part, the relation between interpretation and narration gained from oral history is analysed by means of the basic principles of interpretation using Freeman Tilden and Umberto Eco. The third part of this work gives few examples of places from Graz which are somehow connected to certain controversial historical moments of the city that can be retold by museums. This part is intertwined with the following one, since it tries to formulate possible methods of the ways in which the museums may interpret oral stories and narrations to the audience. It searches other more creative means of the interpretation than the presentation of the stories inside of the buildings of the museums. Instead of a typical summary at the end of the work. The last part tries to open a discussion on the topic “problems of the usage of the method of the oral history in museums”. There are three questions suggested with potential answers. Thus, the main goal of this final part is not to conclude the previous information, but to make readers think about this topic and the problems which are connected to it, so that they may attempt to formulate their own answers to these questions.

1.

Oral history is a qualitative method and a working process thanks to which we can find information about historical topics. It is based on an interview between an interviewer and a witness of contemporary history. The result of this process is an image of human past, which the contemporary witnesses of the specific incident, process or epoch described by their own words. This method is used e.g. for studying contemporary history. It is usually applied when one is dealing with the topics concerning the Second World War, the communist regime, the expulsion of Germans from Czechoslovakia, tense relationships in Balkan and many others. The narration gained from oral history may be used in many ways, for example for science, research, publications, theater performances and exhibitions in the museums, too. These educational institutions apply the narrations from the oral history as a part of exhibitions, workshops, educational programs (stories, songs and poems), didactic materials or on seminars and discussion.

The oral history is a complicated method and it has a lot of advantages and also disadvantages. From the advantages, one may name mainly the authenticity and an emotional side of these experiences. The visitors can focus better on a topic because of these aspects. They may understand better how people survived, how they felt or what really happened to them. It is also another way of educating people, another way of finding and remembering information about these topics. But this method has many disadvantages, too. First of all, and maybe the most serious, is the distortion of history. Memories of contemporary witnesses could have changed. After the years, they may see the history differently than as it actually happened. Sometimes they knowingly or unknowingly add some parts to their stories, because they want to point to the cruelty and the horror of the particular epoch, or they just disagree with the past regime, and so they reflect it in the bad light. That is the reason why one has to be sceptical about the information acquired by oral history and one has to know that it is just an opinion of a person and not a general experience. Secondly, we can talk about the discomfort of these topics. Sometimes talking about the cruelty in 20th century may evoke uncomfortable feelings to some groups of visitors, for example people who survived such an awful experience or young children for whom this could be a very sensitive topic and they would not be able to take it.

2.

After the theoretical introduction, one can state that the narration of oral history is a kind of interpretation of history by contemporary witnesses. Hence, one may reflect on how similar is the narration of oral history to the interpretation? Freeman Tilden wrote a book named *Interpreting Our Heritage*, in which he formulates six principles of interpretation. For the purpose of this article three of them are chosen and applied to oral history. In the first principle, Tilden talks about the non-sterility of interpretation. (Tilden 9) In case of oral history in museums, the narration is not sterile, because the visitors acquaint themselves with oral stories of people and these stories evoke emotions in them. In the second principle, he deals with the relationship between information and interpretation. He claims that information is not interpretation and that they are two different things. However, he states that all interpretation include information. (Tilden 9) In case of oral history, it is very similar. A narration about oral history is an interpretation of the contemporary witness of historical

moments. The narration contains information about these histories. In the last principle, Tilden talks about making of a suitable way to presentation of interpretation for different groups of visitors. (Tilden 9) In case of oral history in museums, one possibility of such an interpretation is an educational program for children with a didactic material, which could re-tell stories in a more sensitive way.

Tilden is not the only one who is dealing with the interpretation, its meaning, theories and principles. Another author is a very famous Italian novelist, philosopher, literary critic and aesthetician Umberto Eco. One of his works was a book named *The Limits of Interpretation*. In this book Eco formulated contemporary theories of interpretation which are complemented by his own semiotic reflection. From these, one should mention mainly the opinion that once the text comes from its originator, there is an endless range of possible interpretations. (Eco 18) This theory could be applied to oral history. Thanks to this process we can find lots of stories which interpret one historical moment but in many different ways. So, it should be pointed out that the oral story of the contemporary witness is not a general interpretation of a concrete historical moment. In his book, Eco also tries to prove that there are limits and criteria of interpretation. For example, one of these criteria is that the interpretation should talk about something that we are able to find and verify its truthfulness. Only then, one may accept it. (Eco 18) It is very similar to formulating interpretation by oral history. As it was mentioned before, people should be very sceptical about the narrations gained by the oral history. With the passage of time, memories may become distorted and the narrations of the historical moment may include fiction, which did not really happen.

In conclusion, one may state with confidence that the interpretation is a part of oral history. It is a result of this method. Interpretation in oral history represents the words coming from contemporary witnesses who describe a real historical epoch, regime or incident. Therefore, it is a subjective experience retold to other people.

3.

The method of oral history could be used everywhere. One may find some examples in Graz, too. There are presented two of them connected to the 20th century. They are also a little bit controversial and one may still find contemporary witnesses of these historical moments, whose experience could be retold by museums. The first example is Stolpersteine (stumbling stone). These are concrete cubes with the names and the life dates of the victims of the Nazi persecution in front of their own houses. In Graz, there are 95 of them. The authors of the article think that there is still a possibility of finding their relatives and acquaintances who could re-tell the stories of the persecuted people to the audience. The second example is Marian Column, which is also very controversial. Firstly, this monument was a part of the propaganda that celebrated the victory over the Ottomans as a triumph of Christianity over Islam. Secondly, in 1988 Hans Hacke veiled the Marian Column with the sheathing, which referenced to Hitler's annexation of Austria in 1939. He reconstructed a Nazi obelisk from 1938, which covered one of Graz's older monuments. This artwork caused a huge debate in the public, and in the end, it was set on fire. This incident happened 30 years ago, so there are

still people who remember it. The creator of the sheathing is still alive; hence he could tell us the story of his artwork and the reasons for which he created it.

4.

The next part of the article should talk about the possible methods of how museums can interpret these oral stories and narrations to the audience. It is difficult to decide on how to interpret controversial history in the public spaces orally. One may think of an exhibition in the museum where a part of it is a discussion with contemporary witnesses about controversial history in the 20th century and listening to their personal stories and opinions. Museums can use public space as a promotion for the exhibition. But how to make it orally? One possible example may be a performance in which people in costumes stand in the streets, parks or stations and sing or read poems or tell stories and the passers-by would try to find out what is happening. Another possibility may have a form of discussions in the pubs where people listen to the stories told in a more informal way. It is, thus, better to hear stories directly from the source rather than listening to a curator in a museum.

5.

Finally, this topic opens a lot of interesting questions for the discussion. For example, how could a museum present this controversial historical topic in an acceptable way to the audience? One may find many different attitudes towards this question. The one widely used claims that the museum should pay attention to the presentation. If one makes exhibitions, one should adapt the presentation and the content to fit the target audience. The topics should not be very touching, because contemporary witnesses or young children might feel uncomfortable in the exhibition. It means that on the one side, visitors should not feel completely comfortable and the exhibition should bring out emotions, but on the other side, this emotional side should be controlled in a way. The other radical opinion to this question is that museums should show one very strong opinion to the visitors, which could touch their feelings. Thanks to this opinion, the visitors start to think about the topic and they start searching for extra information which would agree or disagree with this strong point of view.

Another question is how to convince the contemporary witnesses to talk about the sensitive topics? One of the most presented opinions is that the contemporary witnesses do not want to talk about their experiences because they do not want to tell such a sensitive story to their family since it may hurt them. In this case, people should show them their interest, so that they can open their hearts to them. People should make sure that they will not judge them, because they want to learn from the history, which happened to them. If they are reassured, they will talk about their stories because they will understand the meaning of such a narration.

The final question could be how to find the only one and the “right” example of interpretation in oral history? Answers to this question seems to be very hard to find. The subsequent question could be whether there really exists the only one right example. Or what does the word “right” mean in this case? There are also more versions of the answer to this question. Someone may say that for him, it is better to have more than just one interpretation, so that he could think about them, and then, choose the right ones. Other people may disagree

with it and they may claim that what they need is the only interpretation which starts the discussion on the topic. They may claim that having many interpretations is long-winded and boring. After all, one may state that the finding of the correct interpretation depends on the curators of the exhibitions and the preferences of the target audience.

Sources

Tilden, Freeman. *Interpreting Our Heritage*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007.

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