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## ‘The stories my father told me’: using interviews in teaching Polish history in North America

When teaching about life in Poland under Communism, many instructors in a North American context must rely on a multitude of excellent English language resources, since there is no modern and up-to-date cultural reader on that subject. Some examples of sources commonly used include: scholarly journal articles on politics, society, art and architecture; documentaries and books by foreign journalists, and historians who have first-hand experience of the 1980s in Poland. However, even the best readings often fail to communicate to a North American student group the paradox of life under Communism in Poland. Oral history succeeds where these other sources fail, communicating the particularities of life under Communism in Poland in a way that is both accessible and rich to students. In the following pages, I will outline my practice and methodology of teaching about Communism through oral history and present a case study based on my courses at the University of Manitoba<sup>1</sup>.

The popularity of documenting life stories is reflected in social media as well as award-winning literature. One such example, Brandon Stanton’s *Humans of New York* (2010) presents life stories of New York (and beyond) citizens via photographs<sup>2</sup>. In the Nobel Prize winning *Second Hand Time: The Last of the Soviets* Svetlana Alexievich, a Belarusian oral historian and a journalist, examines life after the collapse of the Soviet Union and uses today’s ‘confessional culture’ to register more than historical events of that time; as she states “I don’t ask people about socialism. I want to know about love, jealousy, childhood, old age. Music, dances, hairdos. The myriad, sundry details of a vanished way of life”<sup>3</sup>. Alexievich gives

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you to all of my students for allowing me to share their essays and reflections on the interviewing process. Special gratitude to Janet Janzen for her comments on this manuscript.

<sup>2</sup> Brandon Stanton, *Humans of New York*, <http://www.humansofnewyork.com>, access: 23 III 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Dwight Garner, “Review: Second Time, Voices from Lost Russia”, *New York Times*, 24 V 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/25/books/review-in-secondhand-time-voices-from-a-lost-russia.html>, access: 23 V 2018.

value to personal experiences of ordinary people. Much in the same way, the rich tapestry of ordinary experiences attracts students to exploring and engaging with history in a format that is more relevant and one they can generate through producing their own eyewitness accounts.

Oral history as both relatable and immediately applicable to their own lives, connects students with subjects that may come across as somewhat abstract and distant, a challenge particular to teaching Polish cultural studies in the North American context. In one of their assignments, I ask students to go out into the community and conduct interviews, creating the opportunity for teachers and students to engage in their communities and collect local histories that helps them, “open new areas of inquiry, to challenge some of our assumptions and judgments of the past”<sup>4</sup>. My subsequent observations of the class experience from interviewing mirror those of Kristina Llewellyn and Sharon Anne Cook, when they write that oral history fosters, “an engagement with the lived experiences of others [...] encourages active and equal participation of all in the learning community, is experiential and inquiry based”<sup>5</sup>. Beyond giving students the experience of practicing oral history in their communities, the assignment is also designed to help students to reflect on the many ways oral history is defined, “to some people, it denotes knowledge about the past that has been relayed by word of mouth from one generation to another”. It is also, “the practice of recording, archiving, and analyzing eyewitness testimony” as well as, “a global social movement for democratizing history; that is, for making the telling and writing of history more inclusive”<sup>6</sup>. Considering this wide range of applications, oral history is a fundamental tool for education; it helps to transition from teaching history as memorizing facts and dates to application of historical thinking.

Prior to conducting oral history interviews and for the first half of the course, students conduct secondary research in the background of their interviewees and the social, political and economic circumstances which influenced their lives. This particular course focuses on Poland between 1945–1998, the dates reflecting the symbolic end of World War II and of communist rule in Poland. Students learn about life under the totalitarian regime through various secondary resources, most of which are chosen for using personal experience to present broader issues. For example, articles by David Crowley “People’s Warsaw/Popular Warsaw” and Boleslaw Janus “The Politics of Culture in Poland’s Worker Paradise: Nowa Huta in the 1950s” reflect on the economic and emotional aspects of rebuilding as well as demonstrating how propaganda was used by the communist government to legitimize

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<sup>4</sup> Kristina Llewellyn, Nicholas Ng-a-Fook, eds., *Oral History and Education: Theories, Dilemmas, and Practices* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Llewellyn, Sharon Anne Cook, “Oral History as Peace Pedagogy”, in: *Oral History*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Llewellyn, Alexander Freund, Nolan Reilly, eds., *The Canadian Oral History Reader* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 3.

their power in post-World War II Poland. Rodger Potocki's "The Life and Times of Poland's 'Bikini Boys'" and a documentary *Guide to the Poles: Political Dress* provides examples of how fashion triumphed over the general misery and fear experienced by Polish society. Students are particularly drawn to stories of creativity in finding, making and sharing clothing and accessories that framed fashion as an expression of individuality and rebellion against the state. Various interviewees testified that wearing well-made clothing or attire which stood out from the rest of the masses, for example red socks, was an expression of individuality for which one could be punished. One of the sources used to portray cultural and religious symbolism present in politics is *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity* by Timothy Garton Ash. His journalist account of the August 1980 strike is told from the perspective of the workers within the Gdansk Lenin Shipyard. Furthermore, students learn the perspective of a child's experiences of growing up in communist Poland from a graphic novel *Marzi: A Memoir* by Marzena Sowa. In class discussions on each source, students are prompted to ask additional questions about the stories, events and experiences.

The second half of the course focuses on the practical and theoretical aspects of interviewing and consists of a series of workshops that prepare students to conduct an oral history interview at the end of the semester<sup>7</sup>. Theoretical background of the subject comes from Perks and Thomson's *The Oral History Reader*<sup>8</sup>, particularly the chapters "Ways of Listening"<sup>9</sup>, "Family life histories: a collaborative venture"<sup>10</sup> and "Learning to listen: interview techniques and analyses"<sup>11</sup>. These readings prompt students to contemplate some very important questions: What type/types of individual life story interview would they choose for their project? Why? List ways in which one can inspire the narrator and jog their memory. Provide a definition of an 'insider' and 'outsider'. What are the advantages and limitations of each? In what way can a personal or collective agenda obstruct the listening process? Explain the difference between an interview as information gathering and an interview as an interactive process.

The next session is devoted to a practical introduction to oral history interviewing. Students are reminded that the first step is preparatory research (which in this case is done during the first half of the semester): exploring history through photographs, artefacts, newspapers and films as well as archival and secondary

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<sup>7</sup> Due to time constraints (the course lasts one semester), each student conducts only one oral history interview.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Perks, Allistar Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London–New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Hugo Slim, Paul Thomson, with Olivia Bennet and Nigel Cross, "Ways of Listening", in Perks, Thomson, *The Oral History*, 114–125.

<sup>10</sup> Akemi Kikumura, "Family life histories: a collaborative venture", in Perks, Thomson, *The Oral History*, 140–144.

<sup>11</sup> Kathryn Anderson, Dana Jack, "Learning to listen: interview techniques and analyses", in Perks, Thomson, *The Oral History*, 157–171.

sources. The following step is finding and selecting interviewees. The majority of students in the Polish Program at the University of Manitoba are descendants of Polish immigrants and have direct access to a good candidate for the oral history interview. Half of that group are the children of the last large wave of immigration of the 1980s. As a result, students of Polish born parents most often choose to interview their mother or father. In other cases, students are encouraged to look for an interviewee within the Polish community or ask the instructor for help with identifying a potential interviewee.

When explaining the project to potential interviewees, students must be very clear on the matter of consent. This particular oral history interview will be shared in class, discussed, analyzed and used as a source while writing the final paper, therefore, all resulting information has to be open to the public. Students are encouraged to share the questionnaire in advance to help the potential interviewee make an informed decision. To ensure that the whole group follows the same method, students are provided with sample emails which they use to request an interview. Similarly, the process of creating a questionnaire<sup>12</sup> begins as a group project where students brainstorm what type of questions should be included and in what order. This exercise includes looking at photographs from Poland representing various public and private activities. Visual aids prompt students to ask more specific questions or to create potential follow ups to more general questions. It is at this point that students are reminded to ask their interviewee to find personal items that might benefit the interview and the project. A final version of the questionnaire can be further modified by individual students with the additional reminder that the questionnaire functions as a guide, and that being flexible and following the direction of the interviewee's story when asking questions will produce a richer source of material for their final papers<sup>13</sup>.

While teaching this course I have observed that the essential part of learning about interviewing is practice. Students begin with listening to two samples of interviews that function as examples of *how to* conduct an interview and *how not to*. The first interview is a model interview and one students can try to emulate. The second has multiple issues: (yes/no questions; interrupting, correcting interviewee; bad set up of recording equipment resulting in either shouting or inaudible whisper). During the following discussion students are asked what worked and did not work with the interviewers' technique? How will these factors influence the interview as it progresses? What did you notice about the technical aspects of each interview? Next, students are encouraged to conduct a sample interview by each

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 1 with interview questions.

<sup>13</sup> Prior to conducting interviews instructor must apply for permission to the University of Manitoba's ethic office. The rules established by the university permit the collection of interviews only for the usage as a class assignment. Separate permission must be obtained from the university and from the interviewees to archive the collected material.

asking me a few questions. Students are aware of the fact that I was born in Poland and that interviewing me may reflect their experience with Polish interviewees. We create a scenario where we are looking at the photo of a group of girl scouts attending the May 1<sup>st</sup> parade and we pretend that I am one of the scouts. As a group, the students have to try to find out as much information about my experiences as possible. Asking questions as a group seems less intimidating, encourages students to share ideas and observe different approaches. Most importantly, after the first few minutes, questions are not only asked but spontaneously analyzed and corrected.

After the students have conducted their interviews, progress reports are the last, crucial aspect of this process and ensure that students follow the assigned deadlines and gain as much from the experience as possible. Completing and analyzing an oral history interview requires good organizational and time management skills. To help them manage the process, I designed a series of progress reports which have to be presented in class and break down the interview analysis into smaller tasks: the first is the summary of the interview in the form of an abbreviated transcript. Second the class presents their interviews, sharing the highlights and the difficulties of the interviewing process. Lastly, students help each other pinpoint a dominant theme in their interviews and connect it with the secondary sources analysed earlier in the semester, in other words, placing an individual story within the larger context.

The knowledge gained through the interviewing process has significant consequences for the students' lives that extends far beyond the course and turns cultural studies into a positive and productive discovery, as is reflected in the students' testimonials: "Learning through an interview is better. I find that it is easier to remember and learn when talking and asking questions" (Tomek)<sup>14</sup>. Another student added "It is a much different experience actually talking to someone who has gone through it personally, then learning from a textbook. I retained more information while interviewing and found the content more interesting" (Allana). "The interviews which I conducted provided for me the opportunity to learn about important individuals in my life in a way which I would have never been able to experience if it weren't for this most interesting assignment" (Veronika).

Collecting oral interviews creates meaningful connections between student and interviewee, bridging generations and cultures. Students gain insight on human determination, decision-making and values. Many students shared the view that: "The most positive aspect of this assignment was that I learned some valuable information about my mother's childhood and the way she lived. We never talked about that and it was nice to learn and know what she went through and experienced. The interview did not change my relationship with my mother if anything it opened my eyes to see how different her childhood was from mine" (Tomek). Another student reflects: "I talked to my best friend's mom, and I could never have imagined her life was as difficult as she described it. I personally have a lot more respect for

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<sup>14</sup> All testimonials used with permission.

her” (Vedad). Further, the interviews brought realization of students’ often taken-for-granted freedoms: “The lives which they lead in Communist Poland were so vastly different from anything which they would have undergone here in Canada. It opened my eyes and helped me understand why they think and act in ways that they do. Similarly, my relationship with each individual changed because I was able to gain a deeper understanding of who they truly are and the life which they came from” (Veronika).

The students’ final essays also demonstrate how oral history interviews helped them to develop ‘historical thinking’ and its six big concepts: “establishing historical significance, using primary evidence, identifying continuity and change, analyzing cause and consequence, taking historical perspectives, and understanding the ethical dimensions of historical interpretations”<sup>15</sup>. Students in my course further foster these skills by placing their interviewee’s story within the larger narrative of history of Poland under the communist rule. However, by using personal account, as Alessandro Portelli notes, students are able to reveal “unknown aspects of known events; cast the new light on unexplored areas of the daily life on nonhegemonic classes”<sup>16</sup>. This discovery can be found in final essays where students highlight the very personal ways in which individuals persevered in life. While analyzing an interview with a person who grew up in the rural area the student notes: “The people of Komorow were close-knit and community-minded, and this not only granted them protection from food shortages, but also from any political turmoil facing Warsawians. [...] This interviewee’s insight into Polish culture is not only intriguing, but also tells a different type of Polish Communist narrative. Urban accounts of Solidarity, Martial Law, informants, and food shortages tend to largely dominate global perceptions of Communist Poland. However, these experiences were not universal [...]”<sup>17</sup>. Placing individual stories within larger national narrative taught students that history is the product of human agency. The lived experiences of interviewees highlight the different ways in which people opposed the political situation. As one student wrote “Under communism, Poland was shut away from the outside world and for people like M.K., escape was found in books and postcards”<sup>18</sup>. In another example “In a world of struggle and hardship art was a bright light in the lives of Polish people, especially in W. S’s life. It also enabled her freedom of movement, both in metaphoric sense, as well as physical sense”<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>15</sup> Ng-A-Fook, Bryan Smith, “Doing Oral History Education Toward Reconciliation”, in: *Oral History*, 66.

<sup>16</sup> Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different”, in: Perks, Thomson, *The Oral History*, 67.

<sup>17</sup> Tristan Zaba, *The Advantages of Rural Living in Communist Poland*. Student essay used with permission.

<sup>18</sup> Kamila Kalita, Student essay used with permission.

<sup>19</sup> Amanda Buhler, *Freedom Through Art in Communist Poland*. Student essay used with permission.

The practice of teaching Polish history through oral history interviews has been a very positive experience both for the students and the Polish community members. Whether discovering a new culture or exploring their parents' past, students found this method of inquiry very attractive. Active participation in the learning process resulted in genuine interest in the history; further, it allowed us to build bridges between academic learning and community life. Interviewees approached this project with enthusiasm, sometimes with disbelief that their 'ordinary life' might be of importance to scholarly study. Last, and for me, perhaps the most important benefit of this experience is reflected in the statement made by one of the students during the class discussion: "I had no idea that my father had such an interesting life".

## Appendix 1

### Topics for discussion

1. Place and year of birth.
2. Where did you reside during the 1970s–1980s?
3. What school/schools did you attend?
4. How did you feel about school?
5. Was your childhood/ youth under communism similar to how children live today? Why?
6. What activities did you do with your friends in your free time?
7. Traditions and celebrations within family. What is your favorite experience?
8. Describe leisure and holiday opportunities.
9. What festivities you celebrated at school?
10. Expectations of children (schooling, careers).
11. What were your favorite music/film/book?
12. Did you feel that the media was being controlled in any way while you were young?
13. Consumer goods: do you remember your toys/clothes/electronic devices?
14. How did your family deal with food shortages?
15. Were you a member of any organizations? Example: scouts, youth groups, church groups.
16. Were you or anyone you know punished for anti-government activities?
17. Describe your memories related to December 13, 1981.
18. What was your reaction when the communist reign fell?

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Summary

The lack of a current cultural studies reader prompted the author to design an oral history course that helps to communicate to North American students the paradox of life under Communism in Poland. Oral history methods as both relatable and immediately applicable to students' lives connect them with subjects that may otherwise come across as abstract and distant. This manuscript provides an overview of the course methodology and resources and presents students' reflections on the benefits of learning through direct contact with witnesses. The author shows that the knowledge gained through the interviewing process has significant consequences for the students' lives that extends far beyond the course, bridging generations and cultures.