

Miroslav Vaněk
Around the Globe
Rethinking
Oral History
with Its
Protagonists



Karolinum

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Rethinking Oral History with Its Protagonists

Miroslav Vaněk

Reviewed by:

PhDr. Pavel Urbášek

PhDr. Pavel Mücke, Ph.D.

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Miroslav Vaněk





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1/ Preface

The publication *On Oral History with Its Founders and Protagonists*¹ was an initial attempt to introduce to the Czech public important international figures in the field of oral history, including their personal recollections and, above all, their views reflecting upon fundamental theoretical-methodological questions in our field. The decision to publish interviews with those who stood at the starting point of oral history's modern tradition and with those currently influencing this multidisciplinary field on an international scale seemed to me in 2008 to be both inspirational and necessary. I was led to this decision by the undisputable fact that various oral historians from sundry universities and academic institutions on several continents have profoundly influenced the work of Czech oral historians, and in many ways their publications have helped them push through a new (and thus considered "dubious" in the Czech milieu) method. Oral history's path was completely blocked off during the communist regime and encountered difficulties even after 1989.² The process of recognizing oral history in the Czech Republic (as in all former Eastern Bloc countries) could be likened to the now legendary pos-

1) Vaněk, Miroslav: *O orální historii s jejími zakladateli a protagonisty* (On Oral History with Its Founders and Protagonists). Prague, The Academy of Science of the Czech Republic's Institute of Contemporary History 2008.

2) Vaněk, Miroslav: *Orální historie ve výzkumu soudobých dějin* (Oral History in the Research of Contemporary History). Prague, The Academy of Science of the Czech Republic's Institute of Contemporary History 2004. Vaněk, Miroslav – Mücke, Pavel – Pelikánová, Hana: *Naslouchat hlasům paměti: Teoretické a praktické aspekty orální historie*. (Listen to the Voices of Memory: Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Oral History). Prague, The Academy of Science of the Czech Republic's Institute of Contemporary History 2007. Vaněk, Miroslav – Mücke, Pavel: *Třetí strana trojúhelníku. Teorie a praxe orální historie* (The Triangle's Third Side. Theory and Practice in Oral History). Prague, The Faculty of Humanities of Charles University – Prague, The Academy of Science of the Czech Republic's Institute of Contemporary History 2011.

tulate by German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer concerning the three phases of accepting new discoveries and methods by the relevant field or, as the case may be, by society. Oral history too passed through an initial phase of ridicule, a second phase of being violently opposed to, and suddenly emerged in the phase of being accepted as self-evident.

In 2012, the Karolinum publishing house offered to publish the book in English. I wavered on whether to accept this offer or not. On the one hand, I liked the idea that an English version would make the interviews accessible to a broader public. This would certainly be appreciated by my colleagues from countries that experienced circumstances similar to those of the Czech Republic (possibly even other countries as well). On the other hand, I was faced with the task of once again asking the narrators to edit and authorize the English text and knew that this could entail a relatively long process. Yet I was mistaken in this. For the most part my narrators (whom I now dare call my friends) reacted immediately.

Some of the narrators had already nearly forgotten about our interview and were surprised that I had “found” this kind of text. Others, in authorizing the interview, pointed out the increasingly complex issue that oral history embodies, whether we are speaking of questions of a theoretical-methodological, interpretational or ethical nature. It was for these reasons, as well as others that I will mention later, that I decided to take advantage of this renewed communication with my colleagues to broaden the original interviews so that they included responses (this time, however, only in the form of email correspondence) to current questions regarding oral history that I had not considered to be overly important six years ago.³ In my view, this attests to one thing: oral history is in the Czech milieu (though obviously elsewhere too) a dynamically evolving field/method of research.

The focus of this study and the aim of these published interviews is certainly not an attempt to create a partial “history of oral his-

3) On the other hand, the English version of the publication does not contain parts of the interviews that were edited out for thematic reasons but released on DVD along with the Czech version.

tory”, nor is it an attempt to answer basic theoretical questions that we are presently posing and will only receive possible answers to in the future (e.g. questions regarding the influence of globalization on the development, forms and tasks of oral history or the dilemma of whether oral history should be considered a research method or a scientific field).⁴ Rather, the objective of this work is to show how internationally prominent researchers, whose work has contributed significantly to the development of oral history, can differ in their views on current and future themes concerning oral history. Yet this heterogeneity of specific views and positions does not divert them from their common goal, which is to develop oral history in historiography and the other social sciences. At the same time, I would like to convey to all my colleagues and, above all, to those studying the humanities an authentic view of the founders and pioneers of oral history. In this spirit, I also hope to inspire them to reflect upon the perspectives and paths that they themselves would like to take if they opt to pursue oral history research.

Just ten years ago I would have considered the chance for me to ask questions to the founders and main protagonists in the field, the very people whom I had known up to that point only through their texts, as more of a fairytale. I still recall the thrill from the first articles and publications written by leading figures in oral history as I literally devoured their ideas on issues in contemporary oral history, its possible crossroads and pitfalls, its future in a globalized world and, finally, its possible use in interdisciplinary research.

Quite a few years have elapsed since that, I dare say fateful (at least for me), meeting when I decided to conduct the interviews (the interviews were conducted in 2007–2008). During that time, several

4) Many more qualified individuals have already addressed the history of oral history. See, for instance: Ritchie, Donald A.: *Doing Oral History. A Practical Guide*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 2003; Sharpless, Rebecca: *The History of Oral History*. In: Charlton, Thomas Lee – Myers, Lois E. – Sharpless, Rebecca M. (eds.): *Handbook of Oral History*. Lanham – New York – Toronto – Oxford, Altamira Press 2006, pp. 19–42; Vansina, Jan: *Oral Tradition as History*. University of Wisconsin Press 1985; Grele, Ronald J. (ed.): *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*. Praeger Publishers 1991; Thompson, Paul: *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*. Oxford, Oxford University Press 1978.

important events have occurred in Czech oral history as well as in my professional life. If I were to attempt to name the most significant of these, the list would be headed by the major breakthrough that occurred on my trip to the 14th Conference of the International Oral History Association (IOHA) held in Sydney in 2006.⁵ Just five months after the Australian conference and the enriching discussions I took part in with Robert Perks, Alistair Thomson and Donald Ritchie in Sydney, we founded the Czech Oral History Association (The Oral History Center of the Institute of Contemporary History had already existed since 2000) as a platform to associate oral historians from all over the Czech Republic. Oral history was gradually established at universities, in museums and in a wide variety of archives, as well as by amateurs using the method to document family stories or the history of local organizations.

Even though I was the only Czech and probably the only representative of the former Eastern Bloc in Sydney in 2006, a highly visible (even from an international perspective) 14-member group of Czech oral historians set out for the 15th IOHA conference held in 2008 in Guadalajara, Mexico. Things developed even more rapidly from there, as it was in Mexico that the decision was made to hold the next IOHA conference in Prague (!). The Prague conference then welcomed what may have been the largest turnout in the history of our meetings with oral historians from literally all continents attending (434 papers were accepted⁶). In Prague I could personally, at least in symbolic gratitude, dedicate the Czech version of the book

5) Perhaps the greatest impetus for the development of oral history in the Czech Republic came from, in addition to foreign publications, these international conferences. I consider my participation in the conferences organized – both the Oral History Association (Durham 2000, Providence 2005, Oakland 2007, Denver 2011) and the International Oral History Association (in addition to the aforementioned conferences in Sydney 2006, Guadalajara 2008, Prague 2010 and Buenos Aires 2012) – to be important meetings for me with the international oral history community. Of equal importance in my view were the oral history panel discussions that I had the opportunity to attend as part of the European Social Science History Conference in Berlin (2002), Amsterdam (2006), Lisbon (2008), Ghent (2010) and Glasgow (2012).

6) For the sake of comparison, the following gives the number of papers received at the various conferences: 1996, Gothenburg 164; 1998, Rio de Janeiro 179; 2000, Istanbul 21; 2002, Pietermaritzburg (South Africa) 154; 2002, Rome 302; 2006, Sydney 203; 2008, Guadalajara (Mexico) 361; 2010, Prague 434; 2012, Buenos Aires 250 estimated.

On Oral History with Its Founders and Protagonists to all those colleagues who had provided me with an interview. To ensure that things were sufficiently symbolic, I presented the book to them from my position as the newly elected president of the IOHA (I still feel it was rather audacious of me to accept such a responsible position).

2/ The reason for a book of interviews

“I believe, and I have said and written many times, that identity doesn’t exist without continuity. However, we can only talk about identity in the case of people who know today what they were doing in the past, who guarantee and have responsibility here also for the things they did elsewhere. That is the reason it is so important to understand and study history; that is why oral history is also very important. I learned from my own experience that if I was to force myself – and if I actually did it – to write memoirs or reflections of what I lived through, it would surely be poor and not very precise in comparison with what it would be possible to pick out of me through oral history: If questions are asked by well-informed and devoted people, cognizant of the context and of all the details, it can happen that the object of their attention starts to recall things they wouldn’t otherwise have remembered or would never have even imagined to be writing about before.”

Václav Havel, 2008⁷

RESEARCHERS IN THE ROLE OF NARRATORS

The idea to appeal to my colleagues and prominent figures in the field came about by chance – I would now call it a stroke of luck.⁸

7) Archive of the Oral History Center of the Institute of Contemporary History. Interviews collection. A video of the greeting of former dissident, playwright and president of the Czech Republic Václav Havel presented at the 16th IOHA conference in Guadalajara, Mexico to support the organization of the 17th IOHA conference in Prague for 2010.

8) It was the pioneers of oral history, those who today are forging the main direction of research, who, above all, occupied the epicentre of my interest in interviews. Interviews with several presidents of the OHA and IOHA were recorded. Among the thirteen people interviewed were experts from seven countries: Australia, England, the USA, Canada, Bulgaria, Germany and Italy. All interviews are in video form with transcriptions stored at the Oral History Center of the Academy of Science of the Czech Republic’s Institute of Contemporary History, Vlášská 9, Prague 1. See www.coh.usd.cas.cz.

During my month-long stay in the USA in 2007, I planned on recording both the talks given at the 41st Oral History Association (OHA) Conference in Oakland, California and several interviews in nearby San Francisco with musicians from the “hippies” period (for my project on the influence of Anglo-American rock music on Czech society). I was therefore equipped with audiovisual recording technology. It took two long sleepless nights of contemplation for the idea of a kind of “second” study to take root in my mind: Why not try approaching the “big fish” of the oral history world and ask to interview them, since I was already prepared to interview Carlos Santana, Peter Albin and Barry Melton?

Another stroke of luck was that the first oral historian I approached with this project was the extremely accommodating David King Dunaway. Not only did he willingly speak of his experiences, but he helped me in the role of “gatekeeper” to contact other pioneers in the field: Ronald Grele and Charles Morrissey. Approaching colleagues I had met in Sydney in 2006 was then no problem. These individuals included Rina Benmayor, Donald Ritchie and Robert Perks. I had originally intended to use the recorded interviews as the basis for an article in a professional periodical, but gradually began to develop a plan to record interviews with other prominent oral historians. The 7th European Social Science History Conference (ESSHC) held in Lisbon in 2008 provided me with the chance to conduct these interviews. Coincidentally, Elizabeth Millwood from the Southern Oral History Program visited Prague in 2007, and so the project included a representative of one of the largest and oldest oral history research centres in the USA.

It was somewhat more complicated, organizationally speaking, to meet with Paul Thompson, a highly revered figure in the field. Following two months of mutual email and telephone communication, Thompson’s book *Voice of the Past* that I was holding served as a recognition signal when I waited for this legend in oral history in a London suburb in front of the Genesis cinema. The interview with Paul Thompson led me to the idea to approach another protagonist in the field, the Italian scholar Alessandro Portelli. My learned col-

league Hana Pelikánová was up to the task of recording an interview in Rome with set of questions in Italian.

The imaginary circle of interviews with prominent oral historians was symbolically closed in Guadalajara, Mexico at the 16th IOHA conference right on the day that the International Oral History Association's plenary meeting decided that the next international IOHA meeting would take place in Prague. Fittingly, in a symbolic sense, the final narrator was Alistair Thomson – the outgoing president of this international organization.⁹ Even before that, however, we were able to conduct an interview with the renowned Canadian historian Alexander Freund.

The selection of the individuals and discussed themes was, for several reasons, given more by the circumstances (possibilities of meeting abroad and the limited time during busy conferences) than by a previously conceived plan.¹⁰ It more depended on the generations they belonged to: from the real doyens of oral history (Paul Thompson, Ronald Grele, who began under the guidance of Charles Morrissey), to the representatives of the older and middle generation who developed oral history in the 1980s, to the representatives of the

9) Pilar Dominguez of Spain then became the new president.

10) I certainly would have liked to record traditional autobiographical narratives by these oral historians. The lack of time (the interviews were often conducted in the “stolen” time during breaks of hectic major conferences), however, only allowed me to focus on a few fundamental questions related to testimony on the nature, principles and perspectives of oral history. I would have also liked to speak with other oral historians that had significantly influenced our field. This was an impossible task, organizationally speaking, and a never-ending project. The following are some other randomly chosen colleagues whom it would certainly have been worth interviewing: Michael Frisch, Mercedes Villanova, Anna Green, Luisa Passerini, Sean Field, Dan P. Dennis, Joanna Bornat, Megan Hutching, Jennie Hopkins Wilson, Jessica Wiederhorn, Albert Lichtblau, Michelle Winslow, Indira Chowdury, Beth M. Robertson, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Graham Smith, Paula Hamilton, Kathryn L. Nasstrom, Todd Moya, Almut Leh, Juan-José Gutiérrez, Helen Klæbe, Regina Fitzpatrick and many others whom my memory fails recalling and who would have definitely contributed to the project. In the meantime, however, other colleagues from neighbouring countries have appeared whose work has revealed them to be enviable interview candidates: they include Monika Vrzgulová of Slovakia, Gelinada Grinchenko of Ukraine and Marta Kurkowska of Poland... Perhaps an occasion will arise in the future for me to conduct interviews with the people comprising the long list that I carry around in my head. Or someone else will do it. I think that a kind of encyclopedia of oral historians would make a very good handbook for many researchers and students in their work. An institution like the IOHA could sponsor this kind of publication.

relatively younger generation, who nevertheless are fully established and proven in their field, or the generation of historians (such as Alexander Freund) that emerged *de facto* in the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹¹

Regardless of their age, all the narrators expressed the same interest and enthusiasm for oral history and openness toward new possibilities – both in terms of technology (in recording and preserving interviews) and in the thematic view of the world, whose political and social systems underwent radical changes in the late 1980s and early 90s. A reflection of historical development is interestingly seen in comparing the ideological spectrum of the early research work of the interviewed narrators. For instance, Paul Thompson and Alessandro Portelli, both originally from the “Old World” (continental Europe and Great Britain), claimed that their leftist political convictions led them to oral history. I find it interesting that the terms “right-wing” and “left-wing” are understood differently in civic, democratic societies in which oral history was an expression of leftist beliefs mainly in the sense that it held an interest in people “off the streets”, marginalized by the majority society and neglected in hitherto traditional historical research.

As Paul Thompson states, oral history’s beginnings in the United States focused on researching the ruling and social elites. This may have provoked an interest and need in its leading researchers to take a look at the other side of the social spectrum and to focus on groups overlooked by historians and ostracized by society. Thompson remembers these early periods as a time when oral historians in America were more like archivists and were “much more interested in great men than ordinary people’s lives, although this has greatly changed since then. So we didn’t get much from their practice and it was really from sociology and anthropology and other social historians that we worked out how to do oral history.”¹² Robert Perks

11) Daniela Koleva, for instance, who was born in 1961, when the veterans of oral history were already developing their first projects in the Truman and Kennedy libraries.

12) Archive of the Oral History Center of the Institute of Contemporary History, Interviews collection. Interview with Paul Thompson recorded by Miroslav Vaněk, London, Great Britain, March 2008.

even claims that in Great Britain oral history began to be established in connection with “a radical socialist, feminist movement as part of the social history in the 1960s, but it’s become a very wide church now of activity”. He does add, however, that today when oral history “is being used by many many disciplines so it’s becoming a methodology that is used more widely than we ever anticipated, [...] there’s also a sense that oral history has sort of lost its radical edge as a political movement and maybe we need to keep an eye on whether we can keep oral history in the forefront of radical change as a social movement”.¹³

The historians arriving in the late 1980s and early 1990s from former Eastern Bloc countries, China and Vietnam were a healthy corrective to the aforementioned leftist view of oral history. For instance, Bulgarian Daniela Koleva’s research career was made possible and inspired by the regime changes in 1989 in the former Eastern Bloc countries. The freedom in research that these changes brought also became one of the sources of enthusiasm and positive outlooks to the future.

Even though the positions of the creators and protagonists of contemporary oral history have often been characterized as leftist, they were mainly radical in the sense that they not only thematically, but also methodologically defied the traditional concept of historical examination and enthusiastically paved their own way for historical research. This perhaps was helped (at least to a certain extent) by the fact that practically all colleagues interviewed had become involved in oral history in their youth (even if in the beginning they may not have even been aware that their type of research fell under the heading of oral history), at the very beginning of their professional development.

Another factor that should not be overlooked is that almost a third of the oral historians interviewed began their professional specialization in fields other than history. Rina Benmayor, for instance, began her work as an ethnologist collecting Sephardic ballads,

13) Archive of the Oral History Center of the Institute of Contemporary History, Interviews collection. Interview with Robert Perks recorded by Miroslav Vaněk, Oakland, USA, October 2007.

Daniela Koleva studied philosophy and sociology and Alessandro Portelli's path to oral history started with his law studies and passed through modern philology and literature directly to oral history when he began to collect protest and political songs (often accompanied by singers' narratives) at the end of the 1960s. Perhaps this too will contribute to an awareness that oral history is open for multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary use and development.

SPHERES OF RESEARCH

From the very start of my oral history project it was clear to me that, due to time constraints and the fact that I would not get the chance to have follow-up interviews with the narrators, I would not be able to apply the usual method for recording biographical narrative. I therefore opted for the method of a structured interview that contained five thematic spheres: when and how the interviewees first encountered oral history; what they feel is oral history's main strength; their take on the criticism and critics of oral history; how they see the future of oral history, and, finally, any possible advice they might pass on to Czech oral historians.

The first theme (i.e. the first encounter with oral history) interested me from both a professional and personal perspective. What paths and, in particular, what motivation led these people to oral history? Even though their motives vary, some similar traits are evident. Above all, they share a clear activism, at times even radical stances influenced by the social changes of the 1960s and, especially, the events of 1968.¹⁴ Another important factor is the interviewees' own interest in the studied field, especially in new research methods. Robert Perks, who presently heads the British Library Sound Archives, then speaks of very unique and interesting motivation for using oral history: in his case, it was an enchantment with modern technology, especially with audio-technology, that led to his early interest in oral history.

14) Cf. Vaněk, Miroslav – Mücke, Pavel: *Třetí strana trojúhelníku* (The Triangle's Third Side) ... c.d., pp. 71–72.

A second, related question that I posed to the narrators concerned the “power” of oral history in historiography and in the other humanities. In this regard, almost all the interviewees mentioned a specific type of information that oral history provides the researcher with and that the historian cannot find in any other sources of information. This is most likely caused by the fact that oral history researchers focus on social classes and individuals that were previously ignored (were not written about) in traditional historical sources, that were marginalized and, in short, were not recorded by traditionally dominant historiography. In the authoritarian regimes these “peripheral groups” were then completely erased “from history”.

Charles Morrissey, one of the founders of oral history, offers an interesting take on the power of oral history: “There are several powers, one of which is obvious: it lets neglected people, neglected by historians, by historical documentation, get into history. So if history is the story of rich and powerful men, it allows poor women to get into the historical record. Secondly, [...] when you go into the interview, you can get someone to evoke the context in which the document was created. [...] With the spoken recollection, which has its frailties memory plays tricks on all of us – on the other hand, some people can come in and zero in precisely on why something happened the way it did that’s quite contrary than the impression you would get from the paper trail. Those are the two primary ones. I’ll mention the third as a self-satisfaction, really, and that is: every oral historian, by asking questions, is co-creating a record, and that record wouldn’t exist if you didn’t exert the initiative to make it happen. So you’re causing something to exist for the future that would not exist if you didn’t help make it exist. [...] Basically I’m a doorkeeper; I open doors and let people into history. And that’s very valuable for the future. I’m a historian with a strong sense of the future needs of historical knowledge.”¹⁵

15) Archive of the Oral History Center of the Institute of Contemporary History, Interviews collection. Interview with Charles T. Morrissey recorded by Miroslav Vaněk, Oakland, USA, October 2007.