

The Importance of Oral History in (Industrial) Heritagisation

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Introduction

Oral history includes both the subjective interpretation of the past (Gyáni 2000: 131) and the methodology that records, documents, and analyses that interpretation. The former, a personal understanding, experience, and/or memory of a past event, enriches the “official narrative”, the historical aspect, and provides the investigation with an individual, interpersonal, and human-focused aspect (Thompson 1978: 6). Among others, its two major advantages are the participatory and plurality aspects of the narrative creation. However, especially due to their co-creation feature, oral history projects, like other types of research, can be influenced by the researcher’s personality and opinion, and the general ideology of the time when the research is conducted (High 2014). Oral history should never be taken as an objective account as it evidently offers a personal interpretation which might throw light upon multiple layers and understandings of the same event. A typical period to showcase the implications of oral history is the Cold War era, when due to top-down oppressive political systems in Central and Eastern Europe it was impossible to criticise the working conditions of the industrial labour. After the political change in Hungary, for instance, the interpretation almost reversed the former viewpoint when the whole period was described as completely negative and harmful (Alabán 2017). Such mainstream interpretations can affect the personal perspectives as well.

Despite its potentially biased and subjective narration, this methodology is especially of value when the research period needs to be investigated as the authenticity or trustworthiness of the available written or material traces might be questionable. This is usually the case with research projects that focus on periods that have been re-evaluated over time. The establishment of the Oral History Archive within the Hungarian 1956 Institute in the 1980s is a case in point. At the time of its foundation, written material about the revolution of 1956 was not yet available, so the only form of sources available for researchers were oral history testimonies (Kozák 1995). Hanák and Kövér both emphasise the “still” and “already” aspects of oral history examples which show that the interviewees’ memory is still vivid and they are already capable to talk about the given past (Hanák/Kövé 1995: 94).

Oral history was the type of research through which underrepresented social communities and their interpretations and memories were able to enter the academic debate. For instance, the female narratives of the industrial culture could be researched and discussed with the help of oral history (such as biographical interviews) throughout different continents. Not only new perspectives could be analysed, but also a research focus formed around how contemporary ideology – such as Catholi-

cism (Arango 1993) or Socialism (Schüle 2001) – defined the possible choices and roles female members of this social unit could fulfil.

Interestingly, many scholars point to the challenges the new technical possibilities (like audio-video recording, online access to interviews conducted by others) put on oral history as a methodology. These challenges include both theoretical questions – even before the introduction of the new European data protection regulations – and actual realisation threats. Oral historians, especially those dealing with traumatic experiences, unquestionably play a significant role in forming narratives of a given recent event (Sommer/Quinlan 2002). In such cases that are swayed by emotions, the adaptation of new technologies which can document numerous aspects instantly as well as provide multiple methods for modification retrospectively can threaten the ultimate requirement of objectivity (Sloan/Cave 2014). Similarly, while new technologies make oral history research projects more accessible to a wider audience, they also complicate the process of protecting (anonymising) the sources (Larson/Boys 2014) or analysing the represented narrations. The same media can either strive for objectivity or allude to subjectivity (for instance, by using sarcasm or overemphasised emotions) of the narration, the distinction of which cannot be decided without background information of the given case. This was the case in numerous Hungarian movies such as *Falfűrók* (1985) about the political change criticising Socialism by sarcastically depicting industrial workers' everyday life. Those movies were directed in a documentary-like style with non-professional actors and seemingly strong sociological messages. Accordingly, this kind of movies could be interpreted in opposing ways. In order to ensure the validity and reliability of an oral history project, it is important to incorporate other sources with which the researched question is compared and contrasted. Oral history alone cannot provide suitable and professional data (Szabolcs 2001: 46).

One of the most common cultural practices of remembering the past is to heritagise it. The terms “heritage” or “patrimony” have incorporated diverse meanings, forms, and effects in different countries and areas of life over the last five decades (Larsen/Logan 2018). A very complex and often overlapping typology of heritage forms has been established during this period, yet without having been commonly adapted internationally (Fejérdy 2011). Such variety shows the richness of this process, but also challenges its adaptability. For instance, we differentiate “heritage industry” and “industrial heritage”. The former refers to the process and apparatus through which (industrial) heritage can be commodified and instrumentalised in order to become an “opportunity space” (Günay 2014: 98) in the post-industrial area. Looking at heritage as a source of economic benefit, besides its identity-forming role, is important not only to protect the heritage that has been revitalised (as this process might lead to Disneyfication, gentrification, and other forms of transforming the authentic values and past), but also to investigate the social practices that capture history at different levels (Walsh 1992). Among others, two outstanding UNESCO World Heritage Council representatives, Ron van Oers and Francesco Bandarin, called for a stronger connection between socio-economic development and conservation strategies in order to sustain what they define as the Historic Urban Landscape (Bandarin/van Oers 2012).

At the same time, industrial heritage is defined by The International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage (TICCIH) in its *Nizhny Tagil Charter*