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**Making Use of Oral History
in the Process of Narrating
the Polish-Jewish Past:
Exhibitions of the Grodzka Gate
– NN Theatre Centre in Lublin**

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Oral history: an “organized” approach to documenting and displaying the memoirs of witnesses to history

The new technologies that have developed in the last few decades and that can be used for recording, archiving, and displaying sound and visual materials are being widely used both by researchers and local memory activists interested in contemporary history.

The practice of oral history, which started in the United States at the beginning of the '20th century, was first mainly understood as “archival practice,” with interviews treated as supplementary testimonies that completed gaps in written sources, similar to journals, memoirs, or letters. The contemporary use of oral history materials developed in Europe grows out of a different understanding of this kind of source. Instead, it is understood as a practice of documentation and research based on particular social assumptions and directed at the combination of historical interests with the problems of subjectivity.² The contemporary approach to oral history is also

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² M. Fiternicka-Gorzko, *Historia mówiona: od metody historycznej do interdyscyplinarnego podejścia badawczego*, “Opuscula Sociologica,” no. 2, 2012, pp. 8–9.

informed by the changes that took place in the methodology of history in the late 1970s and 1980s and were a part of a more general transformation of the broadly understood humanities and social sciences. The changes were connected with the questioning of the post-Enlightenment paradigm of knowledge and the rejection of its conceptualization as a set of facts whose description constituted the main goal of research.³ This period saw the formulation of new research problems and brought new questions that also led to a different conceptualization of oral history. The latter started to appear in the analyses of both individual and collective memory and was used as an instrument to study the processes of experiencing and narrating the past conditioned by a particular configuration of social and political factors, as well as culturally informed models of narration.

Since the 1990s, oral testimonies of witnesses to the past and their audio or video recordings have not been perceived so much as historical sources strictly speaking but rather as materials whose analysis can help in the study of the processes of constructing the narratives of the past. Thus, oral history can take as its object both the linguistic image of the world of the speakers, narrative mechanisms used by them to emphasise or de-emphasise some aspects, or the problems connected with diverse cultural practices that make speakers include or exclude particular aspects of the past from the culture of memory.

Furthermore, oral history interviews are widely recognised as a source material that can be utilised in order to introduce the memories of witnesses to history into the public sphere. Oral history remains basically in the sphere of interest of cultural institutions and non-professional local historians rather than the subject of academic studies (with several important exceptions).

Jerzy Bartmiński, who developed a typology of activities in the field of modern oral history, distinguishes between “spontaneous” and “organised” oral history. The former is the product of people who recall and talk about past events to other people or simply reveal stories regarding the past in various informal social situations. This type of oral history is widely present within each local community that co-creates local history narratives and shapes certain ways of understanding the past among its members.

³ M. Kurkowska-Budzan, *Historia zwykłych ludzi. Współczesna angielska historiografia dziejów społecznych*, Kraków 2003, p. 178, 189–192.

By contrast, talking about “organised” oral history, Bartmiński refers to special projects aimed at recording, analyzing, and displaying oral testimonies of people who recall historical events, figures, or places. The process of recording testimonies must be in this case organised and restricted by certain formal rules of systematic academic research. Projects of this type are being conducted both by scholars working in the field of social or cultural studies and, at the same time, by regionalists, local history activists, and journalists involved in local history.⁴

Over the last thirty years, several “organised” oral history projects have been carried out in Poland. Among others, they included projects aimed at recording testimonies regarding issues that were ignored or marginalised in the official historical discourse in the post-war period. One of the fields that can be approached by referring to oral history is the former presence of various ethnic minorities, including Jews, in the territories of pre-war Poland. The wide variety of “organised” oral history activities includes several projects initiated and conducted by researchers working at universities as well as non-academic initiatives led by local socio-cultural institutions. In the latter case, the recording of testimonies was usually not only a documentary work, as the materials gathered were later often used for educational or artistic purposes. Unlike in most cases of academic oral history projects, recorded audio and video testimonies together with their transcripts were subsequently introduced into historical exhibits, where they complemented visual and textual narratives or created an independent line of a narrative that appealed to the audience through the sense of hearing, affecting their emotions and stimulating their imaginations.

The means of using oral testimonies in exhibitions referring to the past that were prepared by museums or other institutions can be considered to be a separate area of study in the field of cultural studies. Its methodological background is constituted by the theories of the narrativization of the past, concepts of individual and collective memory, and by theories that are being developed in the field of pedagogy and modern museology. Although these issues are discussed in the academic literature,⁵ there are not too

⁴ J. Bartmiński, *Historia mówiona – interdyscyplinarna i wieloaspektowa*, in S. Niebrzegowska-Bartmińska, J. Szadura, M. Szumiło (eds.), *Historia mówiona w świetle nauk humanistycznych i społecznych*, Lublin 2014, pp. 10–15.

⁵ See: K. Kuzko-Zwierz, *Historia mówiona w muzeach. Przegląd projektów prowadzonych przez polskie placówki muzealne*, “Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej,”

many empirical surveys aiming at the study of the processes of perception and reception of exhibitions displaying oral history interviews.

While testimonies collected within academic projects are mostly used only for research purposes, materials gathered by local institutions are much more often re-introduced into the sphere of public memory via their display in exhibitions or their use in other educational or performance projects that are supposed to be a tool for recalling and/or commemorating the past. Assuming that certain connections exist between the way a given community remembers, describes, understands, and commemorates its past and the sphere of values, opinions, and attitudes that prevail among groups and individuals, exhibitions referring to oral history can be thus analyzed as intentionally constructed narratives that are supposed to have an educational impact, i.e. to affect or “act” on recipients not only by passing information regarding past events (referred to as a part of individual experience), but also by stirring the imagination and arousing interest in local history. Individual, subjective stories that refer to certain historical, geographical, social, and cultural realities can thus be viewed as a tool that can reinforce an emotional connection with a place of living, strengthening bonds with other community members and giving a sense of a historical anchorage of an individual’s biography.⁶

Oral history materials referring to an individual’s experience of an urban space prove to be particularly useful in situations when the topography and the urban structure have been altered as a result of historical events. One example is the case of Lublin, a city in south-eastern Poland that for several hundred years was home to many ethnic groups, among which Jews played a significant role. In Lublin, an extensive Jewish quarter developed next to the Christian part of the city.

The majority of the local Jewish community, estimated to include approximately forty-three thousand people (approximately 35 per cent of Lublin’s population) in 1939, perished during World War II. In 1942–1944, Lublin’s

vol. 5, 2015. pp. 91–110; M. Kubiszyn, *Edukacja wielokulturowa w środowisku lokalnym: studium teoretyczno-empiryczne na przykładzie Ośrodka “Brama Grodzka – Teatr NN” w Lublinie*, Toruń 2007; J. Posłuszna, *Dźwięk jako terapeutyczna i duchowa forma upamiętniania oraz przywracania pamięci*, “Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska. Lublin – Polonia,” vol. 30, no. 1, 2017, pp. 88–95; M. Kubiszyn, *Pamięć – niepamięć – współpamięć. Zagłada lubelskich Żydów jako przedmiot kultury pamięci*, Lublin 2019.

⁶ J. Bartmiński, *op. cit.*, pp. 15–16; K. Kuzko-Zwierz, *op. cit.*, pp. 93–95.

occupiers destroyed the Jewish district of Podzamcze and in 1954 the area was completely transformed. Demolished buildings were not reconstructed and the original lines of communication were not preserved. A completely new spatial structure was created while the memory of the old district and its inhabitants has been preserved only in a few modest remembrances founded in the late 1980s; several memorial tablets that were installed a little later; historical exhibitions; and occasional artistic installations or performances. Thus, in further analyses I will refer to oral testimonies and other elements of the audio-sphere presented in two exhibitions prepared by the Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre Centre. Their authors introduced testimonies of former inhabitants of pre-war Lublin recorded within the framework of the *Oral History of Lublin* project that has been pursued by the Centre since 1998. The historical, social, and cultural framework for constructing both exhibitions was conditioned by the current situation of Lublin, whose former ethnic and religious diversity together with the history of the destruction of that world during World War II has determined the character of the contemporary city as a cultural and educational environment.

Oral Testimonies in the Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre Centre’s activities: Vicarious Witnesses and Post-Memory

The annihilation of the Jewish community of Lublin during World War II as well as the destruction of the Jewish districts of Podzamcze, Wieniawa, and Piaski are widely reflected in the memories of non-Jewish citizens of the city. While there are few Jewish survivors who gave their testimonies about the pre-war period and the occupation and there is only a tiny Jewish community in contemporary Lublin that commemorates local community members, these are mostly non-Jews who are engaged in activities in this field.

Both elderly non-Jewish citizens of Lublin whose testimonies have been recorded by the Centre as well as younger generations who are involved in the process of gathering materials and preparing exhibitions can be regarded as “vicarious witnesses.” Vicarious witnesses are defined as people who have no family connections with the Jewish victims and survivors but are engaged in the process of constructing narratives concerning the destruction of the Jewish community. Driven by empathy and emotional engagement, vicarious witnesses understand the necessity to search for and discover stories told by people whose experiences and memories of the fate of Lublin Jews were not preserved and never became a part of a “memory heritage” of the local community.

Oral testimonies, together with such archival materials as pictures, poems, and articles from pre-war newspapers, are used by vicarious witnesses to create new narratives. Therefore, their work can be analyzed using the concept of post-memory in its extended meaning. The concept of “post-memory,” introduced by Marianne Hirsch to describe the influence of the memories of the Jews who survived the Holocaust on the experience and emotions of their family members, is used here in its broad universal meaning. Although primarily conceptualised by Hirsch as a metaphor to express the phenomenon of “inheriting” the historical trauma of earlier generations by their children, in this study it will be used to describe the development of reflective historical consciousness by local community members and as a category informing the theoretical perspective used in the analyses of the processes of constructing memory culture.⁷ Various aspects of post-memory understood as such include such phenomena as “inherited memory,” “belated memory,” “memory implants,” or “received history.” All of these are conditioned by the emotional bond with the victims, survivors, and non-Jewish witnesses of the Holocaust whose memories, together with the subsequent layers of reflection, references, and interpretations built upon them become material for contemporary narratives constructed by vicarious witnesses. When referring to the Holocaust, drawing attention to the actual “non-memory” spheres can be perceived as a symptom of ongoing changes that reflect a process of pluralization the public debate. New narratives created by vicarious witnesses allow for the introduction of certain events and figures into the sphere of contemporary public memory. From this perspective, acquiring post-memory is a form of the “symbolic adoption” of other people’s memories where personal experiences mediated by oral testimonies, as well as by media coverage or artistic objects become – in a metaphorical sense – a part of a “memory” of vicarious witnesses.

The process of constructing new narratives by vicarious witnesses also includes searching for proper forms and elaborating an adequate artistic language that would be understandable and interesting for contemporary visitors.⁸ Recorded oral testimonies that were introduced into commemorative installations, performances, and multimedia expositions launched

⁷ K. Kaniowska, *Postpamięć*, in M. Saryusz-Wolska, R. Traba (eds.), *Modi memorandi. Leksykon kultury pamięci*, Warszawa 2014, pp. 390–391.

⁸ M. Marszałek, *Świadectwo*, in M. Saryusz-Wolska, R. Traba (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 477.

by the Centre within the past twenty years and which refer to pre-war Lublin have been treated both as “historical material” and as “narrative matter.” From the perspective of cultural studies, these activities can be analysed as new, post-memorial attempts at constructing a narrative of the city’s past undertaken by vicarious witnesses.

The Portrait of a Place and Lublin: Memory of the Place: Oral History in the Exhibition Space

Referring to educational and artistic activities held by the Centre since 1998, one can observe an increasing presence of oral testimonies as well as other biographical materials. Exhibitions regarding the pre-war Polish-Jewish Lublin prepared by the Centre and presented in the Grodzka Gate building within the past twenty years are a good example of this trend.⁹ While the first exhibition, which was launched in 1998 (*The Great Book of the City*), used mostly pictures and texts and was prepared as a type of visual installation or stage design, the next one – *The Portrait of a Place*, opened in 1999 – had the form of a multi-linear narrative composed of images, sounds, and texts. Introducing oral testimonies and other sound materials into the display, it created a multimedia installation where visitors were surrounded by simultaneously affecting auditory and visual stimuli. The central element of the display was a structure made of wooden “chests” painted black and hanged side by side on the walls along the labyrinth-like, narrow corridors of the “Grodzka Gate” and the two adjacent buildings that constituted the exhibition space. The wooden structure formed a sort of a “skeleton” on which pre-war pictures in the form of slide projections and enlarged paper copies were placed. Additionally, small speakers were fixed into the wooden chests from which were simultaneously displayed. One consisted of oral testimonies, while the other was a piece of audio art that provided the imagined sound-scape of the non-existing district. Fragments of oral testimonies were assembled to create a fluent narrative yet one composed of independent small pieces of testimonies. Short fragments of interviews that referred to the streets of pre-war Lublin, non-existing buildings, people, and events from the past were separated from each other with the sound of the closing camera shutter and a few seconds of silence. Fragments

⁹ More information regarding exhibitions prepared by the Centre including visual footage is available on the Centre’s website: <http://teatrnn.pl/> (accessed: 07.07.2019).

of oral testimonies that were used to compose the oral history line and in which images, smells, and tastes from the past were recalled by former inhabitants did not create a coherent plot, but rather a sort of “collage” or “oratory of voices.” This narrative layer clearly had, as Joanna Pośluszna argues, the value of a musical composition that was also emphasised by certain musical values of the other element of the audiosphere informally called “the music of the city.”¹⁰ The composition that comprised such sounds as the rumble of wooden wheels, the patter of horseshoes on cobblestones, bell peals, human buzz, the shouts of children, and the cries of street pedlars was composed by Mariusz Kamiński from the reportage section of Radio Lublin. Working on the artistic “reconstruction” of the sounds of the pre-war Lublin for the exhibition, he referred to various historical sources, literary texts, and testimonies of the city’s inhabitants.

The exhibition *Lublin: Memory of the Place* was launched in 2011 and since then has been a permanent element of the Centre’s interiors. Although it recycles several ideas and narrative strategies from the previous exhibit, it is based on a new structural concept. By introducing into the exhibition space several bookcases with files where transcripts of oral testimonies, together with the copies of source materials regarding Lublin’s Jews and the Podzamcze district, are stored, the exhibition refers to the idea of an archive or a library. While the previous exhibition had the form of a complex, poetic narrative where the linear text coexisted with pictures and sounds, the construction of the new display aims basically at arranging historical material and data, although it is also supposed to affect emotions and appeal to the imagination.

Lublin: Memory of the Place consists of three parts that are separated both on a structural and aesthetic level. The first part refers to pre-war Polish-Jewish Lublin; the second deals with the Holocaust; and the third one tells about the Righteous among the Nations (i.e., about non-Jewish Poles who saved Jews during the war). In every part, oral history materials together with other elements of the sound-sphere co-create the narrative and the symbolic meanings of the exhibition.

The first part consists of several elements that were transferred from the previous display. One of them is a “skeleton” made of wooden chests informally called a “memory machine.”¹¹ It holds slide-projectors, each of which

¹⁰ J. Pośluszna, *op. cit.*, pp. 89–90.

¹¹ T. Pietrasiewicz, *Szlak Pamięci. Lublin. Pamięć Zagłady*, Lublin 2017, p. 4.

shows not only one pre-war picture (like in the previous exhibition) but also a series of photographs. The visitors thus have to operate the mechanism of each projector in order to display all the pictures. Paper copies of photographs from the previous exhibition have been replaced by those presented on “light-boxes,” which makes this part of the exhibition appear “modern” and more “technologically advanced.” Instead of two simultaneously transmitted soundtracks with the “oratory of voices” and the “music of the city,” only the latter is displayed, while the testimonies of pre-war inhabitants are available in a separate space. The “oral history installation” informally called the “memory radio station” was placed in the first room of the exhibition. Several small “sound-boxes” were hanged there side by side on the wall. Each “sound-box” contains recordings of oral testimonies that can be played either separately, one after another, or simultaneously. Similarly as in the case of the pictures presented in slide-projectors, the “memory machine” the construction of the installation is supposed to encourage visitors to act in the space of the exhibition: “sound-boxes” doors must be opened by the audience in order to run the recording.

The exhibition *Lublin: Memory of the Place* differs from the previous projects of the Centre also when it comes to its contents. The installations from 1998 and 1999 were focused mainly on pre-war Lublin and showed it as a Polish-Jewish city, only marginally referring to the Holocaust. It appeared in the testimonies of former inhabitants who, among other topics, recalled the events connected with the German occupation and the functioning and destruction of the ghetto. By contrast, the exhibition launched in 2011 includes numerous references to the fate of the Jews during World War II. The heart of the exhibition is formed by the installation *Lublin Forty-Three Thousand*, which recalls the project *Lublin Forty-Three Thousand* carried out since 2015, whose aim is to reconstruct the names and lives of the inhabitants of the Lublin ghetto. The installation *Lublin Forty-Three Thousand* was introduced into the exposition devoted to pre-war Lublin via a system of metal shelves and stands that contain forty-three thousand folders with the information concerning particular people. Some folders are full of specific details, others contain just names and addresses or only names and photographs, while others still remain empty and nameless as they refer to people about whom no information could be found.

Introducing this type of material into the exhibition space expresses, on the one hand, the desire to rescue the memory of each member of the annihilated community from oblivion and, on the other, it is a symbolic

gesture of protest against the Nazi idea of annihilating the whole nation and against post-war amnesia concerning the Holocaust.¹² Next to the folders containing the materials about the ghetto's inhabitants, on the shelves and racks stand binders with archival materials (such as the transcripts of the testimonies of witnesses) concerning buildings of the Podzamcze and Old Town districts, gathered and documented by the Centre as a part of the *Archive of the City* project. The materials contained in the binders are a sort of "analogue" version of the data made available on the Centre's website, which contains various kinds of archival information, technical documentation, photographs, and the recollections of Lublin's citizens.

The second part of the exhibition refers to the Holocaust. It has the form of an installation presented as a separate "unit" in two attached, dark rooms with no windows and walls painted black. The wooden frame of an old door with the remains of a mezuzah separates this part of the exhibition from the one focused on the inter-war period. The first room houses the installation titled: *The Dead Forest*, which is composed of debarking tree trunks. The sound-space is created by the whistle of the wind that was recorded in the area of the former Majdanek concentration camp. Sounds coming from Majdanek were recorded in the place that gathers the ashes of the Jewish victims murdered during the liquidation of the Majdan Tatarski ghetto in November 1942 and near the place where the mass execution called the *Erntefest Action* was performed on November 3, 1943. That day, the German occupiers shot around eighteen thousand Jews from the Majdanek camp as well as from the camp for Jewish soldiers, prisoners-of-war in Lipowa Street, and from the *Flugplatz* work-camp situated not far from the Majdanek camp where Jewish prisoners used to segregate Jewish possessions robbed by the occupiers. Although there are audio and video testimonies referring to the *Erntefest Action* recorded by the Majdanek Museum and several testimonies recorded by the "Grodzka Gate" Centre where history witnesses recall particular episodes and scenes of persecutions, sufferings, and deaths of the Jewish citizens, none of these were introduced into this part of the installation as if the direct narrative approach to these events was considered inadequate. Only the names of 4,500 Jews read by two recorded voices are displayed. The names come from the list that was prepared by the occupiers in 1942 after mass-deportation to the Bełżec death camp and before the transfer of

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 61.

the remaining Jewish population from the Podzamcze ghetto to the new one in Majdan Tatarski.

In the other room, Yakov Glatstein's poem *The Dead Don't Praise God* is read in Yiddish by native speaker Roman Litman, a member of the contemporary Jewish community of Lublin. Although the text is not an oral history interview, this element of the sound-sphere of the exhibition has the value of an individual reflection. The sound of the Yiddish language plays an important role here. The everyday language of the former citizens of Podzamcze that no longer can be heard in the space of the contemporary city became a medium that introduces additional aural and sensual values.

The memories of history witnesses are introduced to the last part of the exhibition. It has the form of an installation titled: *The Memory of the Righteous Among the Nations: The Memory of Light*, which is presented in a wide-open space. It was prepared in 2008 as an element of a larger project aimed at recording the testimonies of the Righteous Among the Nations from the Lublin region. Entering this part of the exhibition, the visitor sees clay tablets with the names of the Righteous engraved on them. Similar as in the first part of the exhibition, there is a huge bookcase filled with almost five hundred files. Each file is devoted to one person and contains information about his or her activity rescuing Jews. Next to the bookcase there is a sound installation. When a visitor approaches it, he or she can hear a "choir" of assembled voices of the Righteous telling their stories. However, once in a while a voice of one person becomes clearer, so the details of the story can be recognised. There are also small "sound boxes" in this part of the exhibition. Opening them, the visitor can play a particular testimony.¹³

Lublin: Memory of the Place as an Example of "Post-Memory Aesthetics"

Although the way that archival materials are presented within the space of the exhibition *Lublin: Memory of the Place* recalls the rigorous way the documentation is arranged in the archive, it also operates with symbols and metaphors and refers to the poetics of performances from the early 1990s prepared by the NN Theatre, whose experiences and artistic formula were a reference point for the further activities on the Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre Centre. It exceeds the frames of a traditional historical exposition towards an "installation" of a performative nature that demands careful watching and

¹³ T. Pietrasiewicz, *Kręgi Pamięci*, Lublin 2013, pp. 106–117.

interaction. Unlike in many other exhibitions that refer to oral testimonies, in *Memory of the Place* pictures and archival documents are not supposed to recall nostalgic images of the past, attempt to “make the history real,” or try to “create the illusion of reality.” Neither is the exhibition meant to create the “illusion of the past” or aim at “visualising” the non-existing city in a purely aesthetic manner. Instead, it creates a space where oral testimonies and other source materials provide the visitors with an intellectual, sensory, and emotionally involving experience that allows them to gather and preserve “prosthetic” memories. Such a conceptualization of the exhibition inscribes itself in the trends dominant in contemporary museology and memorial place education, which define visitors as active participants and co-creators of meanings. They substitute the traditional way of transmitting the information about the past that used introductory texts compiled by historians and objects accompanied by commentaries with complex, multi-dimensional “installations.” Using objects of historical value, audio, and/or video recordings of the testimonies of witnesses, elements of *mise-en-scène* or interactive elements, the artists encourage visitors to participate and act in the exhibition space in order to get information.

The complex, multi-layered narration of the exhibition *Lublin: Memory of the Place* creates a “substitute” or a symbolic representation of the pre-war city and can be perceived, as an example of “post-memory aesthetics” understood as a strategy of talking about the past by memory activists who take on the role of “vicarious witnesses.” This aesthetic tends to preserve the stories of witnesses and to include thus gathered testimonies in the contemporary culture of memory. Exhibitions, performances, objects, and installations in urban space are acts of commemoration meant to rescue the memories of witnesses from oblivion and to offer them a new life. Simultaneously, they regain the fractured narrative of the Polish-Jewish past of the city and create a space to construct a new civil community of memory.

“Saving stories” referring to the pre-war Lublin and its Jewish inhabitants is often mentioned as one of the goals of the Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre Centre’s activity. Tomasz Pietrasiewicz, the director of the Centre who can be considered to be the key architect of the Centre’s activities, emphasises that gathering oral testimonies and re-introducing them into the sphere of the contemporary memory culture of a local community is perceived by him, as well as by other memory activists working in the Grodzka

Gate, as a “mission of some kind.”¹⁴ The head director stresses also that conducting the oral history programme had a significant impact on artistic and educational activities held by the Centre since 1998. The interest in the testimonies of witnesses directed him towards the “culture of spoken communication” and storytelling. In one of the interviews, he recalls: “I started to think whether in a contemporary world there is still any room for vivid and emotional contact between young people who were raised using modern media and someone who simply tells a story. Someone who comes and says: Listen – I want to tell you a story!”¹⁵ This experience inspired Pietrasiewicz, who started his career as a theatre director, to search for an artistic language and technical solutions that would allow him to incorporate the testimonies of witnesses in the form of displayed recordings and printed texts into exhibitions, performances, and educational activities. Referring to oral history sources allowed him to develop social and local aspects of several projects carried out by the Centre. By “giving voice” to the members of the local community whose personal life-experience concerned “local history,” Pietrasiewicz was able to engage the eldest generation of Lublin citizens in the project of “discovering” the Polish-Jewish past of the city. At the same time, by introducing recorded memories into new narratives referring to the pre-war times, he gave the younger generation an opportunity to “deal” with images of the city delivered by people who belong to a different “memory community.”

Oral History in Action: The Local Cultural Institution and Its Mission

The oral history programme and other projects that draw from it should be perceived and analyzed in the wider context of the Centre’s “mission,” which is defined and described in many texts written by Pietrasiewicz, including “project descriptions,” as well as in several interviews given by him. As Pietrasiewicz argues, the Centre is meant to be an institution aiming at building a “shelter” or an “orphanage” for stories of Poles and Jews that

¹⁴ Cf. M. Skrzypek, *Przypadek zamierzony (rozmowa z Tomaszem Pietrasiewiczem)*, “Konteksty,” vol. 71, no. 3 (318), 2017, pp. 37–51; T. Cyz, *Performance z pamięci (rozmowa z Tomaszem Pietrasiewiczem)*, *ibidem*, pp. 52–55; P. Próchniak, *Teatr nocy (rozmowa z Tomaszem Pietrasiewiczem)*, *ibidem*, pp. 57–58.

¹⁵ Cf. T. Pietrasiewicz, *Teatr NN 1990–2010*, Lublin 2010, pp. 47–48.

for years were “abandoned,” “homeless,” and “forsaken.”¹⁶ Recording interviews can be in this context recognised not only as a purely “technical” activity, but also as a symbolic act of collecting and sharing memory.

People of the post-war generations engaged in oral history projects take on the roles of “vicarious witnesses,” “memory sentries,” or “custodians of stories” who record testimonies in order to transmit them further. The act of an encounter with “witnesses to history,” as well as the process of recording interviews and introducing them into the sphere of local memory culture, can be recognised, as Izabela Skórzyńska argues, as much more important than the historical content, i.e. the factual value of recorded interviews.¹⁷

Both exhibitions where oral history interviews were used, not only as a narrative that refers to certain “historical data” but also as “sound” and “language” material, reveal several modes of employment of this type of content. Both exhibitions recall figures, places, and events from the past not by staging them but by introducing certain means of expression and forms of communication typical of an alternative theatre performance or a multimedia artistic installation. Impressions that come from the sense of sight are accompanied by non-visual means of perception and thus general sensory sensitivity plays an important role. The audio-sphere of both exhibitions defines their space. The stationary and silent *mise-en-scène* “comes alive” when lights and sound devices are turned on. Thus the exhibition “performs” for the visitors a “memory spectacle”: an intimate, “stirring theatre performance of thoughts and imagination.”¹⁸ Listening to oral stories provides visitors with an experience that cannot be provided by transcriptions of testimonies. Communicative values of the sound of the human voice emphasises the emotional dimension of the historical content and gives the visitors the impression of “authenticity” and “direct contact” between a narrator and his or her story. The construction of space and the employed artistic means make the exhibition *Lublin: Memory of the Place*, just like the previous *Portrait of a Place*, different from a unified, well-ordered story focused on factographical education. The structure of the exhibition, and in particular the part devoted to the presentation of the Holocaust,

¹⁶ P. Próchniak, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

¹⁷ I. Skórzyńska, *Wyjścia nie ma... Rzecz o Szlaku Pamięci Zagłady Żydów Lubelskich*, “Konteksty,” vol. 71, no. 3 (318), 2017, p. 119.

¹⁸ P. Próchniak, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

illustrate the tendency to provoke the “empathic anxiety” described by Saul Friedländer, well. From this perspective, the recalling of the fates of Lublin’s Jews can be perceived as “working on the sensitive tissue of memory and group identity” where “the aim of historical inquiry is defined as not merely [...] the recording of the past but also supporting critical memory [...] of significant events that became a part of the public space.”¹⁹ Consequently, the analyzed exhibition can be perceived as a form of commemoration of the annihilated community, just as the very act of recording the testimonies of witnesses, gathering archival material, and creation of objects that take on the role of “substitute memory vehicles.”

The visitor who wanders – surrounded by the “music of the city” – in the immense labyrinth-like space of the exhibition is encouraged, by the construction of the display itself, to participate in the process of co-creating the “sound” and “vision” sphere. By operating slide-projectors in order to display archival pictures, browsing through cards with oral testimonies printed on them, opening “sound-boxes” in order to play oral testimonies and by engaging in other activities, one is able to gain insight into the resources that are available in the exhibition. This strategy, present in several of the Centre’s other projects, aims at creating a space for personal, emotional involvement with the historical content. Just as in the case of counter-monuments described by James E. Young, this strategy delegates onto visitors the responsibility to remember the past and to act in order to preserve it.²⁰

¹⁹ K. Bojarska, *Zagłada*, in M. Saryusz-Wolska, R. Traba (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 540.

²⁰ Cf. J.E. Young, *The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today*, “Critical Inquiry,” no. 2, 1992, p. 267–296; *idem*, *The Texture of Memory. Holocaust Memorial and Meaning*, New Haven–London 1993; *idem*, *Pamięć i kontrapamięć. W poszukiwaniu społecznej estetyki pomników Holokaustu*, in J. Jarniewicz, M. Szuster (eds.), *Reprezentacje Holokaustu*, Kraków–Warszawa 2014, pp. 339–361; H. Taborska, *Współczesna sztuka publiczna. Dzieła i problemy*, Warszawa 1996, pp. 55–56 and 58–60; *eadem*, *Dylematy animacyjne współczesnej sztuki publicznej*, in J. Gajda, W. Żardecki (eds.), *Dylematy animacji kulturalnej*, Lublin 2001, p. 233.

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Marta Kubiszyn

*Making Use of Oral
History in the Process
of Narrating the
Polish-Jewish Past:
Exhibitions of the
Grodzka Gate – NN
Theatre Centre in
Lublin*

This article focuses on the role of oral history interviews as sources for narrating as well as enacting the Polish-Jewish past. Special attention is given to two exhibitions: *The Portrait of a Place* (launched in 1999) and *Lublin: Memory of the Place* (launched in 2011). Both were prepared by the Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre Centre, a cultural institution in Lublin which aims at introducing the city’s Polish-Jewish past to the public memory. Oral testimonies that constitute part of these exhibitions will be analyzed as both documentary material, which is a source of certain types of representation of the past, and as “artistic matter” for “memory staging.” This article discusses the substantial value of narratives created in this way in the context of the center’s educational and commemorative activities. It is a part of the author’s research project regarding the use of oral history materials in various exhibitions and artistic activities that refer to local pre-war and WWII history with a focus on Polish-Jewish relations and the Holocaust. The theoretical framework is based on contemporary museology theory, historical research methodology, and education theory.

Keywords: oral history, exhibition, Lublin, Jews, Grodzka Gate – NN Theatre Centre