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The essence of oral history: lessons from Tomasz Strzembosz and Alessandro Portelli

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Abstract

This paper examines the approaches and contributions of Polish historian Tomasz Strzembosz and Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli, highlighting their shared dedication to the fundamental values of oral history despite differences in generation, scholarly paradigms, and political perspectives. Both scholars share a deep commitment to the core values underpinning the ethos of oral history and similarly conceive the historian's role in society.

Key words

Tomasz Strzembosz, Alessandro Portelli, research approach, values, oral history in Poland before 1989



Introduction

“Almost all of my most profound experiences and ‘adventures’ in researching Poland’s recent history have been related to the collection of accounts, or as some prefer to call them, interviews,” Tomasz Strzembosz reflected in 2000.¹ Although 2024 marks the 20th anniversary of his death, few associate this Polish historian with oral history, despite his groundbreaking achievements in the field. Unfortunately, Strzembosz’s contributions remain somewhat forgotten, even though he is a prominent figure among Polish historians of modern history.² The aim of this article is not to chronicle Strzembosz’s entire academic legacy but to examine his approach to oral history. While oral history has its ‘classics,’ figures like Alessandro Portelli, this comparison will highlight the lesser-known yet equally valuable contributions of Strzembosz. Despite working within distinct paradigms, with differing political views, both Strzembosz and Portelli approached their fieldwork with a deep emotional commitment, treating oral history as a personal mission. Not only do the autobiographical statements of Strzembosz and Portelli suggest similarities between them – both are considered charismatic teachers – but what is also noteworthy is their enormous involvement in *pro publico bono* activities – scouting, charitable and cultural non-governmental organizations. Responsibility, dedication, respect, courage, friendship – these are the words we encounter next to their names when we read memories about Strzembosz or statements about Portelli.³

While Alessandro Portelli is universally recognised as a leading figure in the field, can Strzembosz be equally esteemed, at least within the Polish oral history community? Although he did not produce a methodological guide comparable to Portelli’s *The Peculiarities of Oral History*, Strzembosz’s work, starting in the 1960s, was pioneering in its scope and nature.⁴ His efforts contributed to the creation of the KARTA Eastern Archive after 1989, which is widely considered the birthplace

1 T. Strzembosz, *Z przygód historyka polskiej konspiracji wojskowej 1939–1945*, in *idem, W stronę zachodzącego słońca. Życiorysy wpisane w polską historię*, Warszawa 2003, p. 123.

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2 See D. Kałwa, 3R: *Historia mówiona w polskich badaniach dziejów najnowszych*, „Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej”, vol. 7 (2017), pp. 163–183.

3 See A.F. Baran, *Profesor Strzembosz. Historyk Armii Krajowej, harcerz i wychowawca*, Warszawa 2009. In the years 2006–2019, Portelli wrote a blog which included comments from his former students, <http://alessandroportelli.blogspot.com> [accessed: 05.09.2024].

4 A. Portelli, *The Peculiarities of Oral History*, “History Workshop”, no. 12 (1981), pp. 96–107.

of oral history in Poland.⁵ Strzembosz's commitment to the values that underpin oral history is evident in both his research and social activities. These values – respect, equality, and the recognition of lived experience – align with the ethos of oral history as articulated by associations such as the US Oral History Association.⁶ To practise oral history effectively, one must embody these principles, which are nurtured through relationships within the research community and informed by one's personal value system. Tadeusz Tomaszewski's definition of attitude is particularly apt in this context: "Attitude encompasses knowledge and beliefs about the subject, emotional engagement with the matter, and the capacity for action in relation to it."⁷ Both Strzembosz and Portelli demonstrated a strong, steadfast attitude in their work, often at great personal risk, especially in Strzembosz's case, as he conducted research under the constraints of an authoritarian regime.⁸

First, I will present a biographical overview of Tomasz Strzembosz and Alessandro Portelli (necessarily very short), which has been recorded in the literature and is commonly known.⁹ Next, I will examine their autobiographical statements to explore their motivations and formative experiences in conducting historical research, particularly through the oral history method. In this comparative analysis, I will focus on how they define their methodologies, their goals, how they conceptualise sources, their positions in the research context, and their relationships with their interlocutors. I will highlight the values that have shaped their attitudes towards oral history and those they hold in common.

- 5 See D. Kałwa, *Historia mówiona w krajach postkomunistycznych. Rekonosans*, "Kultura i Historia", vol. 18 (2010), <http://www.kulturaihistoria.umcs.lublin.pl/archives/1887> [accessed: 05.09.2024]; M. Kurkowska-Budzan, *Oral history in Poland*, in J. Wojdon (ed.), *Public History in Poland*, New York–London 2021, pp. 123–138; M. Kurkowska-Budzan, M. Stasiak, *Oral History / Oral Sources – Polish Historians' Dilemmas*, "Bulletin de l'AFAS" [online], vol. 46 (2020), <http://journals.openedition.org/afas/4215> [accessed: 05.09.2024].
- 6 See <https://oralhistory.org/oha-core-principles/> [accessed: 05.09.2024]; compare M. Kurkowska-Budzan, *Informator, świadek historii, narrator: Kilka wątków epistemologicznych i etycznych „oral history”*, "Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej", vol. 1 (2011), <https://wrhm.pl/wrhm/article/view/5> [accessed: 05.09.2024].
- 7 T. Tomaszewski, *Psychologia jako nauka o człowieku*, Warszawa 1967.
- 8 Among others, the publications of his books on the opposition movement in Poland, which were produced on the basis of interviews, were deferred. For more on this topic see: A.F. Baran, *op. cit.*
- 9 I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers of this article for their inspiring and valuable comments and bibliographic suggestions regarding the methodology of "professional persona studies," but I would like to point out that I have no ambition to conduct this type of analysis in this short article. I focus only on a selected and very limited aspect of the biography of both scientists, with emphasis on Tomasz Strzembosz's activity in the field of oral history. I also will not devote more than necessary attention to his academic career and research achievements, functioning in the academic and social environment; this has been done in the finest detail by one of his students, Adam F. Baran (see Bibliography).

Although he graduated in law, Professor Alessandro Portelli (born 1942 in Rome) decided to study Anglo-American Studies and connected his academic career with the departments of cultural studies and Anglo-American literature. He taught at the University of Siena from 1974 to 1981 and later at the University of Rome “La Sapienza” until his retirement in 2012. Internationally, Portelli’s works, particularly those in English, serve as key methodological and conceptual references for oral history projects. The author’s most frequently cited texts include the article *What makes oral history different* (*Sulla specificità della storia orale*) from 1979.¹⁰ This appeared in English translation in “The History Workshop Journal,” and in the 1990s it was published in Spanish and finally found its way into a textbook selection of texts edited by Alistair Thomson and Robert Perks.¹¹ The article was printed in Polish translation in a special issue of “Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej” in 2018.¹² Portelli, by introducing a literary perspective to the analysis of oral narratives, redirected researchers’ attention from facts towards meanings. This gave oral history a new impetus to develop at a time of growing popularity in the study of social memory.

Professor Portelli’s academic calling card could read: an expert in the oral history method; a researcher of social memory about the Second World War in Italy; a cultural anthropologist – an expert in folk music and the music of workers and migrants.¹³ “My passions are equality, freedom, teaching, folk music, memory, listening to people’s stories, books and films, and rock and roll,” Portelli wrote on his blog several years ago.¹⁴ These are still, despite the passage of time, the same topics that engage his attention and occupy his time to the same extent, without any division into disciplines, academic and non-academic activities, work and free time. Portelli’s tireless activity on the international public square, involvement in education, also outside the academic framework, and social and journalistic activities define the profile of this scientist-humanist.

Professor Tomasz Strzembosz (born 1930 in Warsaw, died there in 2004) graduated in history from the University of Warsaw and throughout his professional and academic career he was associated with the Historical Museum of the capital city of Warsaw (1954–1966), the Institute of History of the Polish Academy of Sciences (1966–1984, Department of the History of Poland after Second World War),

10 A. Portelli, *Sulla specificità della storia orale*, “Primo Maggio”, vol. 13 (1979), pp. 54–60.

11 *Idem*, *The Peculiarities...*; reprinted in A. Thomson, R. Perks (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, London 1996 (1998 and 2016).

12 A. Portelli, *Co stanowi o odmienności historii mówionej*, “Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej”, special issue (2018), pp. 23–38.

13 See M. Kurkowska-Budzan, *Inny świat jest możliwy. Pasje Alessandra Portellego*, in A. Portelli, *Odkrywając historię mówioną*, M. Kurkowska-Budzan (ed.), Wrocław 2022, pp. 11–19.

14 <http://alessandroportelli.blogspot.com> [accessed: 05.09.2024].

the Catholic University of Lublin (1984–2004), and the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences (1992–2004).¹⁵ Particularly noteworthy is the role that Strzembosz played during the political transformation in Poland, when he started working in 1992 at the newly established Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences,¹⁶ was involved in the work of the Eastern Archive in 1989–1994 and published in “Tygodnik Solidarność”; and also when, after 2000, he participated in the most important historiographical and moral debates related to the attitude of Polish society towards the Holocaust.¹⁷ Tomasz Strzembosz worked among historians of modern history, in which the traditional perception of a “reliable source” dominated at that time. This found, among others, expression in one of the reviews of his book *Anti-Soviet conspiracy and partisanship on Biebrza October 39 – June 41 (Antysowiecka konspiracja i partyzantka nad Biebrzą x 39 – VI 41)*.¹⁸ The reviewer wrote about the witnesses’ memory as an “unreliable” source, which in the case of Strzembosz’s project, however, brought “surprising” results.¹⁹ Indeed, he was a researcher attached to the traditional model of history: he searched for facts and information that formed a logical, verifiable sequence of events, motivations and characters. At the same time, he repeatedly emphasized his passion and devotion to people, through history: “Thanks to history, my life had no ‘empty places.’ I was never bored.”²⁰

Formative experiences

Alessandro Portelli’s first foray into oral history emerged from his ethnomusicological documentation of workers’ songs. His interest in workers’ culture was ignited in the late 1960s through his political involvement in community service in the *borghetti*

- 15 T. Strzembosz, *Tumult warszawski 1525 r.*, Warszawa 1959; *idem*, *Odbijanie i uwalnianie więźniów w Warszawie 1939–1944*, Warszawa 1972; *idem*, *Akcje zbrojne podziemnej Warszawy 1939–1944*, (1978); *idem*, *Oddziały szturmowe konspiracyjnej Warszawy 1939–1945*, Warszawa 1979; *idem*, *Szare Szeregi jako organizacja wychowawcza*, Warszawa 1981; *idem*, *Refleksje o Polsce i podziemiu 1939–1945*, (1987); *idem*, *Bohaterowie „Kamieni na szaniec” w świetle dokumentów*, Warszawa 1994; *idem*, *Saga o „Łupaszce” ppłk. Jerzym Dąmbrowskim 1889–1941*, Warszawa 1996; *idem*, *Rzeczpospolita podziemna: społeczeństwo polskie a państwo podziemne 1939–1945*, Warszawa 2000; *idem*, *W stronę zachodzącego słońca. Życiorysy wpisane w polską historię*, Warszawa 2003; *idem*, *Antysowiecka partyzantka i konspiracja nad Biebrzą x 1939 – VI 1941*, Warszawa 2004; *idem*, *Czerwone bagno. Konspiracja i partyzantka antysowiecka w Augustowskiem wrzesień 1939 – czerwiec 1941*, (together with R. Wnuk, Warszawa 2009).
- 16 Since the establishment of the Institute of Political Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences in 1990, research has focused on post-communist societies and political transformation in a theoretical and empirical dimension and in a comparative perspective.
- 17 A.F. Baran, *op. cit.*, pp. 104–109.
- 18 T. Strzembosz, *Antysowiecka partyzantka...*, Warszawa 2004.
- 19 B. Bernacki, *T. Strzembosz, Antysowiecka partyzantka i konspiracja nad Biebrzą x 1939 – VI 1941*, Warszawa 2004, 283 pp., maps, “Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość”, vol. 4/1 (7) (2005), pp. 377–382.
- 20 T. Strzembosz, *Pochwała historii*, in *idem*, *W stronę zachodzącego słońca. Życiorysy wpisane w polską historię*, Warszawa 2003, p. 218.

(slums) of Rome, where he assisted children with their studies. It was here, in conversations with the residents, that his interest in oral history was sparked. As he listened to their songs, he noticed that they told stories, especially those relating to contemporary history, the labour movement and resistance, which interested him greatly.²¹ Portelli's first "conscious" oral history interview, as he describes it, was with Dante Bartolini, a Communist partisan leader and a poet-musician. Reflecting on this formative experience, Portelli acknowledged that it represented a departure from his middle-class background, enabling him to engage with social realities beyond his own.²²

Tomasz Strzembosz began his conversations with witnesses earlier than Portelli, as early as 1960, although at approximately the same age. He set himself the task ("for himself, not anyone else") of investigating the armed actions of the Warsaw underground in 1939–1944. He collected his first oral reports from people who were known to him due to his scouting past and family connections. Therefore, it was not an entry into a completely foreign environment, as in the case of Portelli, who from the very beginning crossed clear class boundaries which he felt when he entered a workers' tavern in Lazio or Rome's *favelas*. However, Strzembosz soon also went beyond his own social and community spheres. While collecting sources on the history of the underground state, he began to meet with the command and officers, and on the other hand also with rank-and-file members of the underground. When he began research on partisans in eastern Poland, he met the inhabitants of local villages, as he wrote: "Thanks to my field research, I met people I would never have met otherwise"²³ [...] Thanks to history and practising it, I have found many friends and acquaintances who are very valuable to me. These friends and acquaintances are my witnesses to history."²⁴ In his memoir and reflective texts, Strzembosz repeatedly expressed his admiration for his interlocutors and his enchantment with "simple people."²⁵ He wrote: "[...] I have learned to listen to what they have to tell

21 M. Vanek (ed.), *Around the Globe – Rethinking Oral History with its Protagonists*, Prague 2013, p. 123.

22 The result of research on Terni are articles which appeared, among others, in the collection A. Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, New York 1991, and the final book about Terni: *idem*, *Biography of an Industrial Town: Terni, Italy, 1831–2014*, New York 2014, and also a disk with recordings *Avanti Popolo: Revolutionary Songs of the Italian Working Class*, Paredon Records, 1976, re-released in 2008 as a CD by Smithsonian Folkways, as well as by *Circolo Gianni Bosio*; see M. Kurkowska-Budzan, *Inny świat jest możliwy...* See also: A. Portelli, *Fuori verbale: la storia oral 'intervista*, "Nuovi Annali della Scuola per Archivistici e Bibliotecari", no. 30 (2016), pp. 219–234; *idem*, *Due incontri (forse tre) a Isola Liri*, in F. Dimpfelmeister, M. Aria (eds.), *E'ora di andare. Dialoghi nell'assenza in onore di Alberto Sobrero*, Roma 2022, pp. 175–182.

23 T. Strzembosz, *Pochwała historii*, p. 218; This statement seems overly idealistic.

24 *Ibidem*, p. 217.

25 T. Strzembosz, *Z przygód historyka...*, p. 124.

me, even if it is not necessarily factual. What is really important to them, what is their truth and what they would like to convey to the historian.”²⁶

On the other hand, Portelli says:

Plus, when I realized that some of the stories had errors... That’s when my passion really took off: Why these errors? What was the meaning of these stories? [...] I could have said, like many of my colleagues, that oral sources are not reliable. Instead, because I nurtured this artistic and literary passion for narrative – in literature, we never throw away a good story just because it isn’t true. A good story is full of meaning even if it’s not true; like a novel, right?²⁷

Tomasz Strzembosz, despite being delighted with the witnesses whom, as he wrote, he “learned to love,” was of the opinion that what he wrote down in his notebook should meet the conditions of a historical source. He respected detail and cared about the “building blocks” for future synthesis.²⁸ That is why he repeatedly returned to the witnesses, agreed on details, and compared their memories with each other or with the archives. However, just like Portelli, he never lost faith in them: “[...] I can count on the fingers of one hand the ones that were really lies, the ones that were meant to deceive or confuse me.”²⁹

At first, Alessandro Portelli was fascinated by stories, although his later work shows that he is close to both histories woven with meanings and factual history. Social memory is important, as it is seen as an alternative to scientific history, which cannot cope with social problems. Mentioning how he began researching the Nazi massacre in the Ardeatine Grottoes (*Fosse Ardeatine*), the author talked about the political situation in Italy in the 1990s and the shock among Italian historians that the fascist party had come to power. Portelli says that historians, knowing the recent history of Italy, were unable to understand that what was important for the present and for this political outcome were not events, but memory – the Italian “anti-fascist memory.”³⁰ The essay on social memory about the massacre in the Ardeatine Grottoes was commissioned by historians. Strzembosz, on the other hand, claimed that “history is the mother of memory,” and it seems that he did not see an alternative memory, but rather oblivion.³¹ As a researcher, he understood his role as shaped by the academic tradition of history. He never wavered in his beliefs that the truth established by a historian is the reference point for evaluations,

26 *Ibidem*.

27 M. Vanek, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

28 His students repeatedly mention “respect for detail,” e.g. R. Wnuk quoted by A.F. Baran, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

29 T. Strzembosz, *Z przygód historyka...*, p. 125.

30 A. Portelli, *Sugli usi della memoria: memoria-monumento, memoria involontaria, memoria perturbante*, “Studi e ricerche”, no. 6 (2013), pp. 105–121.

31 T. Strzembosz, *Pochwała historii*, p. 215.

and not the other way around. He conducted his work on the basis of such cognitive priorities and for this purpose the long-term search for witnesses (“relationists,” as the author called them)³² who would verify mutual information lasted over twelve years in the case of research on the Warsaw underground, and the number of accounts had reached two thousand by the mid-1970s.³³ The result was a dense web of proven facts. Interestingly, Strzembosz stated in his memoirs that his desire to obtain true information directed him to people, not written memories: “[...] I say this very firmly - I value significantly more highly an oral report, which is given by looking into the eyes of a knowledgeable and critical historian, than I do a memoir written for ‘later grandchildren’ who don’t know anything anyway, and paper is patient and won’t say ‘that’s not true’ or ‘I know that’s not true’.”³⁴

Alessandro Portelli has also been conducting his research for decades. His return to the Harlan County after twenty years was a return, among others, to the same family, to subsequent generations. It is similar with the research on the working-class environment in industrial Terni in Italy, which he has been continuing since the 1970s. In these in-depth conversations, Portelli consciously selects what is meaningful and what is small or even larger information.

Therefore: historical truth and authenticity of stories - these are values that are appraised differently by both researchers, but this does not mean that they are not appreciated by both as one.

Freedom, equality, respect

At the individual level, the scholarly approaches of oral historians often differ. Their theoretical perspectives, political frameworks, interview techniques, and specific objectives may vary. However, the shared values that motivate engagement in oral history and guide the relationships with interlocutors remain a common foundation. Both Strzembosz and Portelli understood that a conversation with an individual who voluntarily shares expert knowledge about their life and experiences cannot be regarded as impersonal or detached in the way other professional interactions might be. Nevertheless, as professionals, by collecting unique information, recording narratives or songs, they acknowledge the ethical debt they owe to their field and to their interviewees. Tomasz Strzembosz wrote about the interview situation: “Both sides are free. Man to man. You can say something and say nothing.”³⁵ Therefore, the first great success in oral history is gaining the trust of your interlocutors and not losing it. He appreciated this especially during

32 *Idem, Z przygód historyka...*, p. 144.

33 By taking part in the so-called “debate about Jedwabne,” which at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries involved broad scientific, social, and political circles in Poland, he did not avoid discussion, and his opinion evolved under the influence of the facts he learned.

34 T. Strzembosz, *Z przygód historyka...*, p. 125.

35 *Ibidem*, p. 127.

his next venture, which was discovering the history of anti-Soviet partisans in north-eastern Poland. He often recalled the beginnings of this research – the first meetings in 1981 and 1982, from which his many years of peregrinations around the Biebrza villages began. In the 1980s, residents were afraid of being reported to the security services, so the way in which reports were submitted to the historian and the reports themselves had a special character. All oral history textbooks write about trust, but not all of them mention that courage is also needed. And this was useful to Strzembosz during the communist period, when he visited officers and soldiers of the Polish underground state and when he travelled around the villages of north-eastern Poland. History was a Cause – thanks to people who trusted the historian and because of the circumstances in which their voices could not be heard openly: metaphorically and literally, when they told their experiences with curtains drawn and doors closed. In 1991, the author recalled:

This work, the result of several years of research, was only possible thanks to the courage and pursuit of the truth of many people. [...] People who, at a time when talking about this topic was still associated with risk, trusted an unknown [original - M.K.-B.] historian, ready – despite all inhibitions and difficulties – to tell him how it really was. Although this truth was difficult, not always heroic, sometimes terrible.³⁶

It is worth adding to these words further memories that complete the picture of restrictions on freedom in Poland during communism:

[...] I could not openly conduct research on one of the most important periods and most important problems in the recent history of my country [...] I did it secretly. It was a paradox that a Polish historian, let's say in 1989, talks to a woman in the countryside [...] and it looks like this: he comes in the evening; enters through the back entrance; the door is quietly closed; the curtains are thick, or the shutters are up; and first the "legend" is established as to why he has come here. And this lasted until 1990. Here, I must say clearly that Stalin died in Augustów in June 1990, because only then was the Union of Siberians established there, and since then I have been able to officially collect reports from sisters, wives, daughters and local partisans at the premises of the Union of Siberians. Because most of them weren't there or they didn't even want to talk.³⁸

In 1973, Alessandro Portelli decided to take a risky trip to Harlan County in Kentucky, even though all his American friends advised him against it, scaring him

36 T. Strzembosz, *Uroczysko Kobielno. Z dziejów konspiracji i partyzantki nad Biebrzą*, "Karta", no. 5 (1991), p. 5.

37 T. Strzembosz, *Bez tytułu*, in Z. Romek (ed.), *Cenzura w PRL. Relacje historyków*, Warszawa 2000, p. 202.

38 Interview with Tomasz Strzembosz on Polish Radio: <https://www.polskieradio.pl/39/156/artukul/956498,tomasz-strzembosz---skazany-na-historie> [accessed: 15.07.2024].

with unpredictable and armed members of the lumpenproletariat. He happened to be there during a period of strikes. He was especially concerned about distrust because he had learned that “in Kentucky they don’t like strangers.” However, he once heard an interlocutor say: “[...] you are just trying to learn something, and people are happy to help you.”³⁹ The trip to Harlan turned out to be not only a research journey, but also an important life experience on which he draws to this day and shares many times in his academic texts. Therefore, the historian’s debt includes not only factual information or an interesting story. Portelli emphasizes that if someone comes out of an interview unchanged from what they were like at the beginning, they have essentially wasted their time. They did not fully exploit the possibility of dialogue, which applies both to himself and the person with whom he was talking.⁴⁰

It is wrong to imagine that a “traditional” historian, such as Tomasz Strzembosz, did not discuss the course of meetings with witnesses or their consequences and nature. He did not devote space to it in scholarly historical works because of the pattern of the academic culture in which he worked. However, in his memoirs he wrote: “It was a story of people [...] but also of experiences, sometimes very deep. Experiences that could only exceptionally be transferred to the pages of a book, but which left their mark on my texts, one way or another⁴¹ [...] we were going through something, we had something important to say to each other.”⁴² He realized that without these meetings and relationships it would not have been possible for him to practise history:

These meetings also taught me to greatly value and respect simple people, [...] co-creators of the most important activities, creators of history;⁴³ [...] people, each of whom was a mystery and carried a mystery that often became a discovery for Polish historical science;⁴⁴ I owe more to them than to many of my university professors, they were often my teachers, guides through the misfortunes of modern history.⁴⁵

The practice, which resulted in thousands of reports, allowed the definition of his own research perspective. He called it

39 Mildred Shackleford (born 1950), New Market, Tennessee, interview with A. Portelli of 11 February 1990, A. Portelli, *Tryin’ to Gather a Little Knowledge*, in *idem*, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*, Madison 1997, p. 78.

40 A. Portelli, *Notatki o historii*, in *idem*, *Odkrywając historię mówioną*, Wrocław 2023, pp. 116–123.

41 T. Strzembosz, *Z przygód historyka*, p. 125.

42 *Ibidem*, p. 124.

43 *Ibidem*.

44 T. Strzembosz, *Pochwała historii*, p. 218.

45 *Ibidem*.

history seen from close up [...] not from a bird's eye view, but at the level of human eyes, through the fate of individual people and their teams [...]. It was like watching a forest: first, at the level of the grass, bushes, individual plants; then, from the height of a tree; and only then from a parachute to once again take a look at the whole thing. Thanks to this, when I looked from above and from a distance, I did not lose sight of what was below [...].⁴⁶

Andrzej Friszke, a colleague of Tomasz Strzembosz at the Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, notes that Strzembosz was fascinated by the history of soldiers, ordinary boys from the underground, rather than the history of those in power.⁴⁷

Alessandro Portelli reiterates that what makes an interview interesting is the fact that it involves two different people who bring their differences to the situation. When this difference is also class inequality, the interview becomes “an experience of equality, a utopian space.”⁴⁸ Tomasz Strzembosz was sensitive to what was happening between him and his interlocutors and also referred to the inequalities that were noticeable: between him, a Warsaw intellectual, and the interlocutor, who could be either an officer of aristocratic origin or a peasant from a Podlasie village. He recalled particularly difficult interviews with high-ranking officers: “lordly, haughty, strict.”⁴⁹ At the same time, he wanted and, judging by the results, was able to understand the witness to history and cope with the dynamics of a problematic interview: if necessary, he spent eight hours at night listening to the report of a Supreme Court judge, and if the situation required, he tasted moonshine at a farmer's house on the Biebrza River.⁵⁰ However, it seems that his attitude towards witnesses of high social status, commanders and officers, was less lenient, and he demanded more from them. He had the experience that commanders “politicized,” so it depended on the historian what information he received. He expected “difficult but fruitful conversations,” such as in the meeting with Jan “Radosław” Mazurkiewicz.⁵¹ His attitude towards the interlocutors he met during field research in northern Masovian and Podlasie villages was influenced by his experience, which had grown over the years. As he said, he learned to ask the right questions and learned to listen.⁵²

46 T. Strzembosz, *Z przygód historyka*, p. 125; *idem*, *Pochwała historii*, p. 217.

47 A. Friszke, *Zawód historyk*, Warszawa 2022, p. 306.

48 A. Portelli, *Notatki o historii mówionej i władzy*, p. 118.

49 T. Strzembosz, *Z przygód historyka*, p. 136.

50 *Ibidem*, pp. 144, 149. In his memoirs, Strzembosz recalls a dialogue with an elderly woman from a village on the Biebrza River, who, having seen a strange man waiting on the street on a Sunday afternoon, accosted him in a way typical of this area, i.e. with a sentence that sounds like a statement, but requires a response, i.e. introducing herself: “I don't know you.” The professor did not know this cultural code and found this taunt funny and the conversation itself uncomfortable.

51 *Ibidem*, p. 137.

52 *Ibidem*, p. 124.

“Whose side are you on?”

The utopian space in which the intellectual and the interlocutor immerse themselves with satisfaction may continue carelessly, but Portelli, following Michael Frisch, reminds us that “the interview is, however, embedded in a socio-historical system of inequality in which we belong to the class with greater power.”⁵³ This power manifests itself when we begin to use the relationships we accumulate. Words, writes Portelli, have been entrusted to us, not simply given, and it is our duty to make the best possible use of them: not for ourselves, but on behalf of those who have entrusted them to us. Tomasz Strzembosz described his role in reconstructing the history of the Warsaw resistance in this precise way: “I learned to look at historical events through their eyes, to feel them with my heart [...] I was ‘their’ historian, with whom they did not have to fight for their truth; this truth was ‘ours’: experienced and attested to by them, accepted and understood by me. We were together.”⁵⁴

Alessandro Portelli titled his book, which summarized many years of research in Harlan County, with a line from a workers’ song: *Which side are you on?*⁵⁵ Portelli acknowledges that, as a researcher, he is always on someone’s side because he is a member of society and feels a responsibility towards it. He recalled that in 1996, when someone painted a swastika on the Rome monument to the victims of a Nazi massacre, a group of people gathered there and started discussing it and also proposed various mechanical methods and chemicals to erase it. He then decided that he would try to “remove the swastika through oral history.” The project on the memory of the massacre at the Ardeatine Grottoes grew into the book *L’ordine è già stato eseguito* (The order was carried out).⁵⁶ The author also devoted himself to institutional work for anti-fascist memory – he was the representative of Mayor Walter Veltroni for “the protection and strengthening of the historical memory of Rome” (2006–2008).

Tomasz Strzembosz, as a historian, defended his independence and the right to establish his own, that is, professional truth. He avoided engaging in postmodern debates about objective truth, maintaining that the historian’s duty is to make every

53 M. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, Albany–New York 1990; A. Portelli, *Notatki...*, p. 118.

54 T. Strzembosz, *Z przygód historyka...*, p. 124.

55 “In Harlan County they say, there are no neutrals here / You’ll either be a unionist or a thug for J.H. Blair” (J.H. Blair was the sheriff of Harlan County who brutally cracked down on unionists). The book was published for the first time in English under the title *They Say in Harlan County. An Oral History*, New York 2010.

56 The book was awarded, in the essay category, the *Premio Viareggio* – the most important Italian literary award, awarded since 1930. After being translated into English, it gained recognition among international readers and researchers and received an award from the American Oral History Association.

effort to determine what, in their view, best aligns with the criteria of truth.⁵⁷ He considered this the social duty of historians. Writing about his interviews, he claimed that the truth may not be heroic at all, even terrible, and if he heard such a difficult truth from his interlocutors, he believed them, he was on their side:⁵⁸ “I was glad that I was the catalyst that brought it [the truth] to the light of day, that made the impossible possible.”⁵⁹

The 1980s were still difficult in Poland for historians of modern history, who had to take into account censorship if they wanted to publish officially. However, there was intellectual and research life “outside the loop.” Tomasz Strzembosz enjoyed enormous authority in many dissident circles, had long been involved in the independent scouting movement, and had a group of devoted students at the Catholic University of Lublin. In 1987, independent circles gathered around the “Karta” magazine initiated a campaign to collect memories about the fate of Polish citizens in the East (i.e. in the areas occupied by the Soviet Union during the Second World War and in the areas that fell to the USSR under the terms of the Yalta and Potsdam conferences) and about the anti-communist armed underground in post-war Poland – the so-called Eastern Archive. In other words, memories of groups excluded by the official, regime history were recorded or written down. Following the political breakthrough of 1989, the Scientific Council of the Eastern Archive was established, and Tomasz Strzembosz became its vice-chairman in 1991. During this period, he also began working at the Institute of Political Studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences, where he and his team conducted research on the Soviet occupation. The series of initiatives and events in which Strzembosz invested his time, talents, and efforts contributed to the broader process of systemic transformation in Poland after the fall of communism. Throughout this period, he remained committed to the principles of civic responsibility and engagement. It is worth adding that the symbolic transformation in Poland was not completed either in 1989 or five or ten years later. In its first stage, monuments honouring the Red Army and Lenin were toppled and the names of streets and squares were changed. The settlement with material memorabilia took place quickly. The second stage involved changes at the deep level of public discourse. As one of the writers involved put it: it was about

57 T. Strzembosz, *List do Redakcji*, „Tygodnik Solidarność”, (1999) no. 9, p. 15; T. Strzembosz, *Kilka myśli o roli ‘zdrowego rozsądku’, czyli o tym czego teoria Darwina może nauczyć historyka dziejów najnowszych*, in J. Drob (ed.), *Kościół, społeczeństwo, kultura. Prace ofiarowane profesorowi Wiesławowi Müllerowi*, Lublin 2004, p. 594, cited after A.F. Baran, *op. cit.*, pp. 76–77.

58 T. Strzembosz, *Uroczysko Kobieleno...*, p. 5.

59 Idem, *Z przygód historyka...*, p. 158; when Alessandro Portelli repeats that he does not agree that the task of oral historians is: “to give voice to the voiceless,” he is referring this slogan to the lower classes, who, after all, do have a “voice” – they have their own stories and are able to convey them, have their own history and culture. He sees this slogan as an expression of the paternalistic attitude of intellectuals towards interlocutors from the lower classes; see A. Portelli, *Notatki o historii mówionej...*, p. 116.

“rewriting Poland.”⁶⁰ The intentional distortions or omission of many facts from the 20th century by the official history to that date, and thus the exclusion of the experiences of many people, had led to the outbreak of both a spontaneous and state-organized “memory restoration” movement. The Eastern Archive campaign, which started in Warsaw, turned into a nationwide social movement, a great campaign was carried out to “refute the lies of history” – this was the phrase on everyone’s lips.

In 1991, the 5th issue of “Karta” published a text by Tomasz Strzembosz entitled *Uroczysko Kobielno. Z dziejów konspiracji i partyzantki nad Biebrzą* (Wilderness Kobielno. The history of the underground resistance and partisans on the Biebrza River 1939–1940).⁶¹ This was concrete documentation – reports he had obtained over the years in the field and documents from the archives of the General Sikorski Institute in London. It is difficult to cite all of them, although it is tempting; great and touching words, so characteristic of the author and perhaps resulting from the historical moment in which they were published. He wrote in the introduction:

Nevertheless, despite the constant fear of consequences, trust and the need to share what was stuck in their hearts like a thorn prevailed: no one refused to talk to me. [...] In these oral accounts given to me directly, in letters, in memories, people who had so far been ignored by our historiography spoke, perhaps for the first time, so loudly and clearly. The accounts testify not only to the value of the common man’s memory, but also to the power of survival, which did not allow us to forget about the emotional connection with that period and its affairs. [...] I bow my head low before these people [...].⁶²

Conclusion

Although the projects of the “Karta” community were groundbreaking for numerous political and social reasons, it is important to re-examine the timeline to explore the genealogy of oral history in Poland. As early as the 1970s, academic historians began to recognize the scholarly potential of autobiographical oral accounts, which they referred to, following sociological tradition, as “induced sources.”⁶³ Tomasz Strzembosz, however, started talking to witnesses to history even earlier, in the 1960s. He created his own workshop individually, defined his research fields himself, and was responsible for them, without being subject to political influence or censorship. He paid the price for this independence with delayed academic advancement, but he retained his integrity. His repository of written accounts is not only numerous but also significant, and has become the foundation of serious, pioneering

60 L. Szaruga, *Dochodzenie do siebie. Wybrane wątki literatury po 1989 roku*, Sejny 1997.

61 T. Strzembosz, *Uroczysko Kobielno...*

62 *Ibidem*, p. 5.

63 See M. Kurkowska-Budzan, M. Stasiak, *op. cit.*

academic studies. As a university teacher, he left behind a school of modern history – his master’s and doctoral students, while preparing their diploma theses, learned how to conduct field research and talk to historical witnesses.⁶⁴ Despite these hard facts, in my opinion, what is more important in assessing the importance of this scholar in terms of oral history is his research attitude and system of values.

For fifty years, oral historians have been haunted by fears related to high ethical standards.⁶⁵ After many years, it must be said that permanent anxiety is the core identity of this discipline, and at the same time, we can talk about the ethos of practicing oral history. Ethical considerations find their expression in scholarly works and reflective essays, such as those written by Tomasz Strzembosz, a historian of modern history. Strzembosz, who for over thirty years met with witnesses to the most difficult events, documented their experiences, collected facts, explained, negotiated versions, and “was with them.” Although his writing style was characteristically lofty, he did not write solely for rhetorical effect. His reflections are embedded in events, conveying his own research experiences and assessments, both successes and failures. Being a committed social activist, scout, and educator, Strzembosz took his role as a historian–citizen seriously. He also carried out his mission through press journalism.⁶⁶ The same must be said for Alessandro Portelli, whose passion for social activism has not faded since the 1970s. *Circolo Giani Bossio*, the community center he co-founded in Rome, has grown into an oral history archive, music school, and cultural centre.⁶⁷

Even though their goals and modes of academic work differed, both were primarily fascinated by the experience of meeting another person.⁶⁸ For them, a research project is a cause, a humanistic one, which carries existential values. This central issue pales in comparison to matters such as whether a witness is ‘politicising’ or whether the account is tape-recorded. For both Strzembosz and Portelli, the most important elements in this humanistic project are Freedom, Equality, Self-respect, Wisdom (a mature understanding of life), and True friendship. Moreover, the same meeting from the perspective of the other party – the interlocutor – carries just as much weight. Strzembosz and Portelli are also aware of this and take responsibility for it.

The fact that Tomasz Strzembosz treated narrators seriously is proven by the memory of one of them, deposited in a completely separate archive:

- 64 See a recollection by Janusz Marszałec, one of Tomasz Strzembosz’s former students, shared during a memorial gathering in his honour: <https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/aktualnosci/612,Spotkanie-poswiecone-pamieci-prof-Tomasza-Strzembosza-Warszawa-17-listopada-2004.html> [accessed 09.10.2024].
- 65 A. Sheftel, S. Zembrzycki, *Who’s Afraid of Oral History? Fifty Years of Debates and Anxiety about Ethics*, “The Oral History Review”, vol. 43 (2018), no. 2, pp. 338–366.
- 66 T. Strzembosz published in “Tygodnik Solidarność” in 1981, republished in 1989.
- 67 Portelli has been a regular columnist for “Il Manifesto” since 1972.
- 68 Portelli writes: “[...] what fascinates me about oral history is the personal experience of meeting, hearing so many ordinary and extraordinary stories,” *idem, Notatki o historii...*, p. 120.

I had a meeting with [...] scouts of the Republic of Poland (ZHR). I told them about my memories from [19]39. They said: "Please write it down, and we will publish it." I sent it - silence. I also sent these materials to Professor Tomasz Strzembosz. I got an answer; I keep it as a souvenir [...]. It is written there in such sloppy writing that [he] can hardly see anymore and that's why he writes like that [indistinctly]. However, he replied, and these ZHR activists said nothing at all. He even corrected some things in my text. I hold it as sacred; it is scribbled on many sheets of paper. He wrote back to me, a poor, blind man, two weeks before he died. He also gave me methodological tips.⁶⁹

Alessandro Portelli, a resident of Rome and a representative of the "baby-boom" generation, is a literary scholar and social activist; while Tomasz Strzembosz, a resident of Warsaw and a figure of the pre-war generation, is a historian and scout. Both are extraordinary intellectuals whose scientific and social biographies are often surprising and undoubtedly dynamic, shaped by personality traits such as ambition, independence, responsibility, and courage.⁷⁰ Furthermore, one notable commonality between them is their profound sense of gratitude towards the world and its inhabitants. Through their life stories, attitudes, and scholarly achievements, Strzembosz and Portelli offer an exceptional lesson in what oral history is.

69 Kazimierz Grelak, interview from 28.01.2014 conducted by P. Lasota, Ośrodek "Brama Grodzka - Teatr NN", historiamowiona.teatrnn.pl [accessed: 15.07.2024].

70 M. Rokeach, *Beliefs, attitudes, and values: A theory of organization and change*, San Francisco 1968; *idem*, *The Nature of Human Values*, New York 1973.



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Summary

In 2000, the Polish historian Tomasz Strzembosz reflected that nearly all his formative experiences in researching modern history stemmed from the collection of oral testimonies and memories. As we mark the 20th anniversary of his death in 2024, it becomes pertinent to revisit his contributions to oral history, a field with which he is not widely associated, despite his significant and pioneering work in gathering and compiling oral accounts since the 1960s. This paper examines the approaches and contributions of Polish historian Tomasz Strzembosz and Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli, highlighting their shared dedication to the fundamental values of oral history despite differences in generation, scholarly paradigms, and political perspectives. Both Strzembosz and Portelli exhibited a profound commitment to the essential tenets of oral history and maintained a similar understanding of the historian's role in society, even while operating within distinct academic frameworks and possessing divergent political views. Their work in oral history was characterised by significant emotional investment, as both scholars viewed their research as a personal mission. While Strzembosz focused on establishing historical truth and authenticity, Portelli was more interested in the meaning and significance of the narratives presented by their interviewees. Nevertheless, both historians recognised and valued the unique information and insights that emerged from their oral history projects. Notably, this paper highlights Tomasz Strzembosz as a renowned historian of modern Polish history, who, despite his significant contributions, has been rarely acknowledged by the field of oral history.