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REMEMBERING FORGOTTEN TRANSPORTS: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE WITH ORAL HISTORY

Lukáš Přibyl, a Czech historian and filmmaker, wrote and directed *Forgotten Transports* (2007-2009), a four-part documentary on a lesser-known side of the Holocaust. Based on 400 hours of interviews recorded in twenty countries on five continents and ten years of work, each of the four films describes one destination of Nazi transports and one unique "mode of survival" in extreme conditions - told, for the first time, by Czech and Central European Jews deported to unknown ghettos and camps in Latvia, Belarus, Estonia and Poland.

The film about Estonia offers a fascinating story of a group of young women and girls who—thanks to youthful naivety, friendship, mutual help and giving up individual opinions—managed to pass through camps while remaining oblivious to the genocide around them. Unlike in Estonia, where there were no male survivors, from the 7,000 Czech deportees to Belarus no women came back. However, twenty-two fiercely self-reliant men did, due to resistance and armed struggle. These men fought, were killed, but also killed.

Forgotten Transports to Latvia depicts the effort to preserve a semblance of normal family life in ghettos and camps. Young people fall in love, dance at clandestine parties, children attend school but on the way to it have to pass by the gallows—life in the shadow of death. The film about deportations to eastern Poland is concerned with the psyche of people permanently on the run, constantly in hiding, who had to continually feign and change identities.

The film on "Poland" is thus a story of the loneliness of individuals who have to joke to survive; "Latvia" is a story of families; "Belarus" is a story of men; and "Estonia" is a story of women. Each film is designed to stand on its own, but when screened as a series a certain superstructure becomes apparent, allowing the viewer to compare individual survival strategies and reactions and difficult choices faced by people exposed to ultimate violence.

Employing no commentary or contemporary footage, only true, time-and-place precise images, Přibyl's film documents every word of the witnesses by painstakingly researched visual materials. This minimalist montage of narrow, personal points of view and never seen materials combines to paint a life-affirming picture of survival through luck, wisdom, ingenuity and sheer will and shows the Holocaust "as we don't know it."

In this essay, Lukáš Přibyl reflects on the oral histories he conducted as part of the extensive research for this film.

Once upon a time, long long ago, I listened to Heddy Faerber's stories. Told in Czech coated in her native sweet Viennese German accent and cutely lacking elementary rules of Slavic grammar, she could always come up with some wildly entertaining tale from her youth. Heddy was a charmer, a tiny great

woman, a neighbor, a close family friend and my occasional babysitter. I loved the evenings spent with her and actually preferred her yarns to my Grandfather's odd habit of reciting Homer in ancient Greek or even the Andersen fairy tales and the rather grim Grimm ones my mother used to read to me.

I still recall some of Heddy's adventures - like the one about digging into a pile of manure on her journey through the flatlands of Poland, when a Stuka (which I assumed to be a huge predatory bird) dived down on her, or the story of the brazen thieves of Lemberg (whom Ali Baba would have surely been happy to recruit), or the spitting contests she and her friends held in the icy forests of Siberia to determine the temperature by the chink of the saliva in the crisp air (there was not a word about spitting in Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen").

I did not know it then, but with my nightly milk with honey I was also imbibing oral history. I no longer drink milk except in coffee or the odd White Russian, and it is often the TV that puts me to sleep these days, but my fascination with human narration remains as strong as then. Ever since my sessions with Heddy, the past for me is inseparable from the men and women who lived it. History is, as I see it, ultimately a collective result of actions of individuals and the description of the final outcome—of the "grand event"—rarely satisfies me if it does not include a picture of what it was like for a mother to give birth to her baby in a concentration camp, or a "tunnel rat" to enter the smell and grit of the dark, hot, narrow, booby-trapped hole in the ground.[1]

Some historians disregard oral history altogether because of its supposed dearth of rootedness in "concrete, hard" fact (no proper history without documents), while some resort to it only for lack of other documentation. However, I am certain that oral history, besides providing much historical "flavor," can be as good a source of information as any other. It is particularly the case when the historian is concerned with "an enquiry into the extent and nature of free will within the general structure of human society"[2] (microhistory), but (combined with other available sources of course) it can be found valuable for virtually every kind of history.[3]

1 Of course, the deeper one goes into history, the less oral history can be utilized—but as "microhistory" and "history from below" persuasively show, there are ways and sources for the historian to bring the individual view into historical writing. For a good example, see Carlo Ginzburg, "Witchcraft and Popular Piety: Notes on the Modenese Trial of 1519," in C. Ginzburg, *Myth, Emblem and Clues* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1990), 1-16.

2 Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory," in Peter Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1992), 95.

3 Oral history is closely linked to micro-history "because of its focus on individual lives and its mode of transmission." See Alessandro Portelli, "Oral History as Genre," in A. Portelli, *The Battle of Valla Guila: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 16. Portelli is correct to point out that oral history is universal and can be used in all kinds of histories, yet it is undeniable that it is greatly suited for use in conjunction with micro-history, as it provides ample material for what micro-history is aiming for: "The search for a more realistic description of human behavior, employing an action and conflict model of

There is little rigid about oral history, despite the ever-growing number of people who use it in their research.[4] It seems to me that most oral historians are on their own, left to their own devices, since there is really no single set of methods of interviewing, no one and only "correct" interviewing style, and the whole field remarkably lacks conventions. The following is therefore an account of my own personal interviewing experience and my thoughts regarding the significance of oral history.[5]

Provided the most difficult task of locating and persuading witnesses (or interviewees, subjects, survivors, etc.) to talk has been successfully accomplished,[6] I first allow the interviewees to tell their story the way they themselves see fit. I only place a few guiding, rather open-ended questions relating to the basic issues I want to learn about and then listen, with few

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man's behaviour in the world which recognizes his - relative - freedom beyond, though not outside, the constraints of prescriptive and oppressive normative systems. Thus all social action is seen to be the result of an individual's constant negotiation, manipulation, choices and decisions in the face of a normative reality which, though pervasive, nevertheless offers many possibilities for personal interpretations and freedoms." (Levi, 94) Looking at history through the prism of an individual's life and memories, like microhistory's reduction of the scale of observation, can "reveal factors previously unobserved." (Levi, 97) "Phenomena previously considered to be sufficiently described and understood assume completely new meanings by altering the scale of observation. It is then possible to use these results to draw far wider generalizations..." (Levi, 98)

4 Oral history is relatively ill defined. It is essentially a "historiographical practice" and it too shares with microhistory the lack of "established orthodoxy to draw on. The wide diversity of material produced clearly demonstrates how limited the range of common elements is." (Levi, 93) This theoretical "looseness" might be one of the reasons why it relatively often attracts wrath from the more traditional, "document-minded" scholars—even though this view is quickly receding.

5 I have conducted over 400 hours of interviews, mostly with Holocaust survivors and WWII veterans, but also with several Holocaust "perpetrators" and a number of the so-called "bystanders.

6 Oral history is exciting, since one has to be many things at once: a detective, a historian, a psychologist, etc.. It is truly "a learning experience," each time one goes to conduct an interview. (Portelli, 10) While Portelli only mentions this in passing, contacting someone does not automatically guarantee his or her consent to an interview. Since I often interviewed greatly traumatized people, obtaining their permission took me, in some cases, up to two years of gradually building a relationship of trust and understanding. Persuading people who never shared the innermost secrets of their lives to talk also sometimes requires a variety of time-exacting techniques—for example, after having been refused several times, I resorted to interviewing all of "my" persons' acquaintances and friends. In the end the people I was truly interested in volunteered themselves, as they felt "left out," as if I judged their experience to be of lesser importance—despite the fact it was them who denied me the interview earlier on. I can also conclude that people who resisted my interview efforts the longest usually, in the end, were the ones who found testifying the most therapeutic and gave the most honest and detailed answers. I agree with Portelli's experience that the interviewee acquires "status and importance, in his own eyes as well as his daughter's, because of the interview itself." (Portelli, 4) There is however yet another aspect. It is much easier to share reminiscences with a "stranger" than a relative, as a bit of "distance," mainly emotional, is needed. Holocaust survivors, in particular, often want to "protect" their children, look towards the future and avoid "burdening" families with their painful histories.

disruptions of the narrative on my part. Knowing in advance that they will be interviewed, people tend to prepare a general story line to present to the asking party, anticipating what could be of interest to him or her.[7] In the process of rehearsing recollections in their heads ahead of the interview, they also subconsciously repress certain memories and willfully select not to talk about others, deciding *de facto* on what they are willing to share in advance.[8] It is the task of the interviewer to charm them and even respectfully trick them into telling more.[9]

I generally find it most useful—after this relatively free-wheeling stage of the interview when the story has been told the way the interviewee desired—to follow up with a barrage of most specific questions (and here good preparation, study and knowledge of all available sources of relevant information are absolutely key). A multitude of precise, targeted queries is seemingly placed without any order in front of the interviewee.[10] Abrupt breaking up of the chronological sequence of the interviewee's pre-prepared

7 As "the whole story has hardly ever been told in sequence as a coherent and organized whole," this is the stage when "the speaker tends to strive for best possible diction." It is also the time when the narrator resorts to "conversational repairs and after-the-fact corrections, for the sake either of completeness and accuracy, or of dramatic effect." (Portelli, 4-5)

8 There are things about themselves or others the interviewees might not be willing to reveal, and some issues they simply think uninteresting to the interviewer. "Both subjects bring to the interview an agenda of their own, which is constantly renegotiated in the course of the conversation." (Portelli, 10)

9 In the end, witnesses often want to confide issues that were to originally remain hidden. I was surprised how often I learned from women about rape and sexual exploitation, and only once was I asked not to use the interview. I myself would never have expected these women to entrust such painful memories to a young male. I was even told: "First I was not going to tell you, but now I see you understand." Often, however, rape is not referred to as rape but rather "misuse" or "violation," while it is sufficiently clear what the true meaning of these terms is. The use of language by interviewees is another large and entrancing subject that cannot be discussed here.

10 I am de facto using a mixture of approaches that Portelli terms "questionnaire" and "thick dialogue," as I utilize both a set of carefully prepared questions that I apply to people with a similar experience (for example prisoners of a given camp) and open-ended dialogue. Interviews are in fact conversations, but it should not be deduced from what I have just written that they should be random. They must possess some structure, at least in the initial stages of the interview, but I believe the organization of the interview should not be overly rigid, as not to prohibit one from asking additional queries as issues of interest arise. This is also the reason why I do not find much use for the "scientific" method of interviewing using only (in my view inflexible) questionnaires. My feeling is that real life does not fit into them. Questionnaires are convenient if one desires to collect a large number of easily comparable answers to use for a statistical approach to a particular phenomenon, but if their overall number is small when read on their own, they tend to be the least informative. Portelli writes: "An interview can shift from a one-way *questionnaire* to *thick dialogue,* according to how much space questions allow for the answers, and to the way in which the answers act upon the questions." In a judicial interrogation or a sociological questionnaire, the informant's answer to a given question may not influence either the form or the order of the questions to follow, but in a thick dialogue, questions arise dialectically from the answers. Once again, it is important to state that neither form is "better than the other; rather, they are suited to different ends: comparability and factuality in the questionnaire, individuality and subjectivity in the thick, open-ended dialogue." (Portelli, 11)

story and looking in depth at specific issues usually brings out a surprisingly large amount of information that has not been mentioned, or had been glossed over in the initial stage.[11] Then I proceed to ask some of the same questions in a rearticulated manner. Often looking a bit slow-witted, I even ask: "Sorry, I did not quite understand what you said about such-and-such, could you please repeat or explain it?" Since some of the originally unanticipated queries spark long buried memories, their retrieval can be difficult and answers tend to be fragmented.[12] Once the interviewees reiterate and "polish" their responses, additional associations arise, are expressed more clearly and more fully and better placed in the general context. By this time I usually also achieve such a degree of intimacy, comfort and rapport with the interviewees that they let their defenses down almost fully.[13]

This is, I believe, the moment to bring one's knowledge of the subject into the discourse, with mentioning of specific names of people, incidents, etc. I am extremely wary of interviewers who (and it seems to be a rather common nuisance) cram into their inquiries all the information the interviewee really should be providing, denying themselves the possibility of comparing the subject's answer with knowledge they had already obtained, or will yet obtain elsewhere.[14] Nonetheless, by the very end of the conversation I feel questions that provide some factual information are justified. [15] In my experience, by this juncture in the interview the interviewees' immersion in the past is frequently so deep that if one shows a thorough familiarity with names and circumstances, the interviewees lose their sense of time and distance and start addressing me as if I was "there" with them, disregarding the fact that I am generations younger.[16] One's ability to improvise in the conversation and to

11 This breaking of the chronological order of the interviewee's narrative is most important with people who have already talked about their experience or have been interviewed previously. This is similar to what Portelli states about people used to speaking in public: "oral history is more intrinsically itself when it listens to speakers who are not already recognized protagonists in the public sphere." (Portelli, 6)

12 The interview "may raise questions about aspects of experience that the speaker has never spoken or even seriously thought about." (Portelli, 4)

13 However, a "... a critical, challenging, even a (respectfully) antagonistic interviewer may induce the narrator to open up and reveal less easily accessible layers of personal knowledge, belief and experience." (Portelli, 12) This is indeed the case, particularly with people who have already been interviewed or told their story. They know the impact of their words on the listener and therefore attempt to steer the interview the way they want, or exact an emotional response (a feeling of pity for them, for example). The interviewer needs to find the delicate balance between showing some compassion for the interviewees' feelings, while at the same time being sufficiently "harsh" in order to demand composure and answers containing facts.

14 "The field-worker is not in the field to talk but to listen" and should never "express complicated ideas of his own that will muddle the natives' accounts." (Portelli, 11) That is what differentiates the oral historian from the inquisitor.

15 To give an example, a question such as: "Do you remember Peter S., he had a girlfriend called Helen in the camp?" can spark a flood of reminiscences: "Yes, absolutely, she was gorgeous, dark blond, and actually, my best friend was in love with her best friend."

16 Interviewees at this point often start turning to me as if I were actually there and then start posing questions to me like: "And do you remember this other girl, I can't recall her name now..." or "Were you there when they shot X?".

readily supply a missing link or piece of information (the name of the interviewee's best friend's girlfriend, for example—yet even then I usually do not give the data straight away, but provide a handful of suggestions for the interviewee to choose from) helps to uncover deeper and deeper layers of memories.[17] Furthermore, the questions the interviewees then ask *me* can also be extremely revealing.

Once the task of interviewing has been completed, a difficult yet most relevant duty remains—evaluating the interview. To what extent can oral testimonies be believed, especially those recorded decades after the events described took place? "Traditional" historians often distrust oral testimony, and in some cases rightly so. Human memory is imperfect, subject to physical deterioration and to collective versions of the past—and sometimes even prone to self-reinvention.[18] Yet each interview has to be assessed and corroborated individually, and wide generalizations about the uselessness of oral history cannot be made. Since I mostly interview Holocaust survivors, I will provide some examples: I have observed that the problem of people stating "incorrect" facts is particularly acute with former inmates of Auschwitz and other "better known" camps, but not with survivors on the whole. Memory's quality and susceptibility to outside influences is highly individual, but the more publicly discussed the topic of conversation is, the more often I encounter what I term "memory pollution."[19] It is a paradox, but by working to spread information about the Holocaust and making it widely available through books, TV and other media, historians are in fact tarnishing one of the sources of that knowledge. The survivors are absorbing this public lore, at times losing the ability to distinguish between their own memories and facts they learned in the post war period, particularly as that integrated information often helps them to interpret, identify and place into context events and people from their own recollections.[20] Nevertheless, while the factual

17 I do not wholly agree with Portelli on this point: "Oral narrators are aware of this written destination, and bear it in mind as they shape their performance." (Portelli, 5) This might be true in the very beginning of the interview, but interviewees usually get too swept away by their own narrative to keep this in mind throughout.

18 I am certain that if one tries to convince oneself about a certain declaration about one's past for long enough (years), it is possible, with time, to actually start truly believing in this claim. This can eventually lead to personal tragedies, when one gets so used to this self-image (since now others also take it for granted) and is confronted with the original "fact."

19 Talking to Slovak survivors of the 1942 deportations to Auschwitz, upon asking: "Where did you disembark?", I was in several cases given an answer, after a moment of hesitation: "On the ramp?!" The ramp was not built yet, but since the vast majority of survivors (who arrived in 1944) rightly claim to have gotten off the trains there, the interviewees no longer trust their own memories and adopt the "majority" view of things. If there is a sufficient amount of "public" information about a particular event, survivors will also frequently respond to a question by describing a situation that they clearly could not have lived through themselves. Still, they consider this event true, since they could have gone through it, they know enough people who experienced this or a similar event and the situation described in their answer matches the general contours of their own observations and memories.

20 The nameless SS man on the ramp responsible for the death of the survivor's family suddenly gains an identity. That is the case with Josef Mengele, for example. Most Auschwitz

information in these interviews can be only partially correct, it does not mean they are completely worthless.[21]

On the other hand, I have found that testimonies of survivors from little researched places tend to be exceptionally accurate. Generally, the less "known" the place or event, the more trustworthy the interview—for somebody who is the sole soul to survive a particular transport, there are no peers to confabulate recollections with and to compare, adjust and mold ideas about them. Isolated, these men and women in the absolute majority of cases do not suffer from imbibing post-survival knowledge into their memories. There simply are not any readily accessible materials or testaments to influence their minds. They only tell what they remember and answer many questions with straightforward "I don't know." Sometimes what is not remembered is as important as what is. In other instances interviewees consciously refer to knowledge acquired later by means of comparison: "It wasn't done like in Auschwitz where I was, you know, we wore civilian clothes, no stripes."

Taking into consideration the inadequacies of human memory, much effort must be taken to scrutinize each interview, comparing it to other testimonies and using all available sources of information, especially archival material of various sorts. However, giving the "paper trail" too much credence and over-relying on written sources might be a grave mistake (an error I believe many scholars make), as these can be just as flawed and biased as human memories. Sometimes they are outright false and I was in fact able to disprove the accuracy of several reports and interpretations of past events based on them—thanks to the use of oral history.[22]

Even if an interview fails to provide new details and information that alters established views, it is still a window into the minds and deeds of people who

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survivors will claim that he was in charge of their selection (on the ramp). Mengele was just one of a number of SS men carrying out this grisly task and did not introduce himself to newcomers. Nevertheless even people who spent only a day or two in the camp, and had almost no chance of meeting him personally or learning his name, claim to remember him vividly. His name has become such a powerful symbol of Auschwitz that survivors simply assume it must have been him, and they are no longer able to discern the difference between their actual memory and their description of that memory.

21 There is of course the issue of people lying consciously. I believe falsity can usually be discerned and even countered by a well prepared interviewer. Even interviews where the interviewer knows people are not telling the truth the information need not be without value—talking to members of former SS squads, I did not (rightly) expect to learn much about their actual participation in killings. However, they tried to "supplement" their brief answers on such topics by expanding their responses to "non-threatening" inquiries, providing a valuable insight into the "mindset" of young men in these units. Portelli had yet another experience: "Fascists and capitalists who knew which side I was on often gave me much more vivid and motivated accounts and explanations than if they had blandly assumed I shared their party or class line. Thus, what the interviewer reveals about him or herself is ultimately relevant in orienting the interview toward monologue or self-reflexive thick dialogue." (Portelli, 12)

22 To provide at least one example, I closely followed a discussion concerning the number of deportees to Nisko (the first war-time deportation scheme in which Czech Jews were taken to the East). Transport lists of Jews from Mährisch Ostrau are available, but there are slight

lived in the past we describe, giving history the flavor, smell and color without which it could easily be reduced to a dry catalogue of facts and figures. Unlike a number of other interviews I recorded, Heddy's life-story, once I learned it in full, actually did not teach me any history-turning 'facts' that I was not already familiar with. Yet because of the way it was told, her life remains for me the quintessential embodiment of the twentieth century Central European Jewish experience; history personified and brought to life.

A couple of years ago I actually returned to my home town, which my family moved away from when I was six, to interview Heddy. It was then that I got to know that my nighttime stories were just the "entertaining" bits of her life.[23] This time she bared all: about her escape from Hitler's Vienna to Czechoslovakia, from which she—when Bohemia and Moravia too were taken over by Nazi Germany—had to run again. After the outbreak of World War II, she made it, dodging Stukas (which I now know to be quite a different kind of bird of prey), to Soviet-occupied part of Poland, only to be soon hunted down by the NKVD in Lemberg (Lwow, Lviv) and sentenced to twenty-five years of hard labor for being an illegal alien. Released with her husband from the Gulag on condition that they join the Czechoslovak army in exile, she lost her love to the very first battle the Czech battalion fought at Sokolovo. Their new-born baby died of illness soon afterwards.

I have read dozens of books on the first half of the 20th century, on the Nazi and Soviet empires and World War II. Yet it is thanks to Heddy that when I come across the term Stuka, its shrieking resonates in my head and the ring of the word Gulag does not only bring to mind the statistics of the millions of people who lost their lives to hardship and cold there, but also the glassy clink of saliva flying through the air

discrepancies in the total numbers, and historians have attempted to explain them based on other extant German documents. Thanks to personal testimonies, I was able to find out that both the original lists and their explications are entirely distorted. I tried to trace the fate of every listed deportee and locate all the available survivors. In close to two dozen cases, I was able find the people whose names and birth dates matched those on the lists, but who claimed never to have been deported. Most of them already left Ostrau, which is on the border with Poland, during the summer of 1939, when the Polish territory was still unoccupied. There is only one interpretation of why their names showed up on the lists—the German administration made it easy for itself. Rather than search for these missing unaccounted for people, their names were added to the list of deportees and "order" was made in the Jewish personal files. Statistically, the number of these "virtual" deportees must have been much higher, as I was of course able to talk only to those who survived the war, who were alive 50-60 years after the events, and whom I managed to track down. There are several other instances where testimonies helped me to disprove official German documents beyond any doubt.

23 "What is spoken in a typical oral history interview has usually never been told *in that form* before." (Portelli, 4) "Most personal or family tales are told in pieces and episodes, when the occasion arises; we learn even the lives of our closest relatives by fragments, repetitions, hearsay. Many stories or anecdotes may have been told many times within a narrator's immediate circle, but the whole story has hardly ever been told in sequence as a coherent and organized whole." (Portelli, 4)