

Satellite Meeting: Innovative approaches in engaging people with local history and genealogy

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Local History in the Library: Listening to South Tyrolean Stories

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Abstract:

The term 'oral history' generically defines the historical research methodology which collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews. An oral history interview usually consists of a well-prepared interviewer listening to an interviewee and recording their conversations in audio or video format. The recordings are transcribed, summarised or catalogued and stored in a library or archive. These interviews can be used for research purposes or released in a publication, a radio or video documentary, a museum exhibition or a theatre performance.

Between 2003 and 2007, the South Tyrolean historian Giorgio Delle Donne conducted oral history interviews to document the experiences of people who had settled in South Tyrol. By the end of the project, he had interviewed 148 people, 'privileged witnesses' of local history selected from the Italian-speaking community of South Tyrol. He stored these interviews in the Italian Provincial Library «Claudia Augusta» in Bolzano/Bozen to provide schoolteachers with the opportunity to use these video interviews in their teaching of local history. Over the years, the library has continued collecting interviews to document local history.

This paper focuses on the collaborative work between librarians and interviewees building a unique local history collection. The voices of the individuals represent the multiplicity of perspectives in dialogue with each other, this way reinforcing the process of recognition of the people as a fundamental part of this community. The importance of the accessibility guaranteed by a proper preservation of the interviews is a fundamental tool for enhancing the life stories of the interviewees which become fundamental sources to research local history. The role of preservation unites oral history and the library. Oral history is a conversation about the past that happens in the present and is future-oriented; similarly, archiving means choosing, interpreting, and keeping traces that would otherwise be erased.

Keywords: Oral History, Local History, Libraries, South Tyrol.

In his guidebook to oral history, *Doing Oral History*, the historian Donald A. Ritchie presents oral history as a process that “collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews”¹. He underlines the need for a well-prepared interviewer who can question an interviewee and record their exchange in audio or video format. The quality of the recordings is essential and can facilitate the transcription, summarising or indexing of the interview which is then stored in a library or archives. There are many ways of doing oral history and a variety of disciplines have enriched the development of this methodology, so that the interviews may be used for research publications, but also “radio or video documentary, museum exhibition, dramatization or other forms of public presentation”². Although oral history interviews are considered primary sources for historical research, it is important to underline that “transcripts, catalogs, photographs and related documentary materials” are part of the oral history research and must be archived along with recordings”³.

Considering its usefulness as a method for documenting recent times and expanding historical sources, oral history has always had a close connection with local history. Local historians can deepen the knowledge of their city, county or region by interviewing people involved in local events. Oral history projects can also be important for gaining a historical background understanding and for building up new documentation; for example, during the interviews it is possible to rescue family letters, ephemera, photographs, diaries, because “the best local documents [...] will often be found not in the library or the record office, but in the home”⁴. Many oral history projects are concerned with local history and, for decades now, many libraries have been organising and developing oral history program. At the end of the Sixties, the historian Richard A. Bartlett suggested that “oral history [...] belongs as a discipline, or an accession method, not to historians but to librarians. It is a technique requiring highly trained, well-educated, and specialized personnel, but still, these people should work out of a librarian’s office, not out of a history department. The challenge is to librarians, not to historians”⁵. The Italian Provincial Library ‘Claudia Augusta’ in Bolzano, where I have been working as a librarian since 2008, took on this challenge and launched an oral history project which records video-interviews with significant local figures.

The Italian Provincial Library is a local library which promotes the study of science, literature, and art with a focus on Italian-language writings. It also collects writings and works by South Tyrolean authors published in South Tyrol and abroad with a focus on Italian culture. It is important to emphasise the library’s interest in Italian language and culture, because there is another local library in Bolzano which mainly holds documents in German and Ladin. The presence of two different local libraries is explained by the specificity of the local area. South Tyrol is an autonomous province based on an ethnic quota system. Declared affiliation to an ethnolinguistic group determines the quota size of each group – German, Italian and Ladin – and calculates the proportions for the ethnic quotas to which a set of rights and benefits are connected. “Failing or refusing to provide a linguistic declaration, or affiliation to one of the ethno-linguistic groups, automatically causes exclusion from the proportional system and the

¹ Oral History: Defined, <<https://www.oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-history/>>.

² Ibidem.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Raphael Samuel, *Local History and Oral History*, *History Workshop*, n. 1, 1976, pp. 191-208.

⁵ Richard A. Bartlett, *Oral History: some thoughts after the third national colloquium on oral history*, *The Journal of Library History* (1966-1972), vol. 4 n.2, 1969, pp. 169-172.

renunciation of the rights and benefits which can only be enjoyed through it”⁶. It is important to consider that “the political system of South Tyrol is based on the dissociative conflict resolution model, a model that assumes the formal and informal separation of language groups across policy fields and in the public sphere”⁷.

The oral history project of the Italian Provincial Library started in 2003 thanks to a local historian, Giorgio Delle Donne, who decided to video-interview “privileged witness” of local history, as he called them: 148 people – 120 men and 28 women – selected from the Italian-speaking community of South Tyrol. Most of those interviewed arrived or were born in South Tyrol from the 1930s onwards, during the Italianisation of the territory under the Fascist regime. At the beginning of every interview, the interviewee read a recording agreement in front of the camera, then the narration started with the history of their family and the move to South Tyrol. Their school experience and the beginning of their career in different fields, such as education, business, administration, arts, culture, architecture, entertainment, communications, politics, are always important parts of the narrative. The narrators were free to present their own stories, the local historian asked follow-up questions for clarification and to correct basic factual errors; at the end each person received a copy of the interview. During my PhD project I started the transcription of the interviews, and I completed the cataloguing of the recordings. In the last few years oral history has become a ‘librarian job’ and me and my colleagues started to collect new interviews with the same focus on the history of the Italian-speaking community of South Tyrol. We participate as interviewers, keeping in mind that content and information should be created for and by the community. We recognise the difficulties of accessing the wealth of information in the interviews and have considered the need for accompanying documentation, such as transcriptions, interview catalogues, indexes, to bring the interviews closer to the audience. Finally, we determine how this material will be shared with the interviewees and the audience, for example by sending a copy of the audio recording to the participants, creating web pages about the project, inserting the interviews into the library catalogue, but also by using the interviews during library events, such as photographic exhibitions.

Oral interviews feature a narrator remembering the past, but attitudes and feelings of the present will inevitably impact on recollections of the past. “It should also be remembered that oral interviews are not history but one source among many that historians use when producing a written record of the past. They must be scrutinized and validated in the same manner as other sources”⁸. Our mission is to collect, preserve and share interviews that reflect the Italian-speaking community’s perspective, and it is here that a dilemma arises. We as interviewers and librarians of an Italian institution, which is part of a political system that assumes a separation between ethnic groups, belong to the very community that we examine.

⁶ Arianna Piacentini, Power-Sharing, Ethnic Quotas and ‘Others’: ‘Opportunistic Alignment’ as a Strategy to Overcome Exclusion? Evidence from South Tyrol and Bosnia Herzegovina. Eurac Research, doi:10.57708/B16880984.

⁷ Elisabeth Alber, Günther Pallaver, South Tyrol: 50 Years of Power-Sharing and Federal-like Relations, 50 Shades of Federalism, 2021, <<https://50shadesoffederalism.com/case-studies/south-tyrol-50-years-of-power-sharing-and-federal-like-relations/>>.

⁸ Nancy Smith Midgette, Expanding local resources: the challenge of oral history, *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, vol. 67 n. 3, 1983, pp. 350-355.

The risk is “to enhance feelings of local identity and pride, and to sidestep more difficult and controversial aspects of the community’s history”⁹. We face the challenge of establishing a balance between the political situation and our professional responsibilities, trying to build bridges between the communities. For example, we are evaluating the possibility to translate the transcription of the video-interviews in other language, such as German or English, so that the wider public can compare with conflicting viewpoints and look at local historical events from multiple perspectives. By adding a wider range of voices to local history, “oral history doesn’t simplify the historical narrative but makes it more complex and more interesting”¹⁰.

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⁹ Allen Safianow, The challenges of local oral history: the Ryan White Project, *Indiana Magazine of History*, vol. 112 n. 1, 2016, pp. 33-54.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.