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Oral History and Biographical Method. Common Framework and Distinctions Resulting from Different Research Perspectives

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Abstract Reflections undertaken in this article are a direct result of the research into the fate of *Children Born of War* (CBOW) in Poland and relate to the methodological, epistemological and ethical tension experienced while working with the interview partners and analyzing their biographical accounts. The encountered difficulties became a root cause of the critical reflection and an impulse to an attempt to systematize the knowledge about the mutual relations of two research traditions: oral history and biographical method which have coexisted over the past few decades, interfering and penetrating each other to such an extent that many researchers began to equate them or consider one of them as a part of the other and vice versa. The chaos of terms and concepts was of great importance in this process. The text also presents similarities and differences of the two approaches both in an epistemological and ethical sense. The attitude towards the narrator, which is mainly the result of different scientific goals that researchers aim at in both research fields was recognized as the fundamental difference. However, underscoring the differences has no purpose of setting boundaries, but it is a postulate to be more careful and bear theoretical and methodological self-awareness of researchers, it is also meant to foster mutual learning and inspiration, which can positively affect the quality of research and analysis.

Keywords oral history, biographical method, life story, autobiographical narrative interview, interdisciplinarity, ethical dilemmas

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This text is based on my oral presentation given at the first conference of the Biographical Research section of the Polish Sociological Society, which took place in Spała in May 2017. The impulse to deliver the speech and then to write the article was the need to share the thoughts that accompanied my research work regarding the fate of people born because of the war (*Children Born of War*, CBOW).¹ This reflection is related to methodological, but also epistemological and ethical tension that I experienced working with my interviewees and during the analysis of their stories.

For a long time I could not decide whether I should include these interviews in the tradition of *oral history*, closer to me ideologically, but not having one cohesive concept of analysis of the acquired materials²

¹ *Children Born of War*, whom in Polish I call “dzieci urodzone z powodu wojny” (children born because of the war), are people whose mothers were Polish women or so-called autochthons inhabiting the lands included within the borders of Poland after 1945, and whose fathers were foreign occupants, either aggressors or representatives of the Allies of World War II (soldiers, members of police and paramilitary groups, or administration employees). Mainly German and Soviet soldiers were the fathers of my interlocutors, but there were also a German property manager and an American soldier. My doctoral project is carried out simultaneously at the University of Augsburg and the University of Warsaw under *co-tutelle*, and is also a part of international research funded by the European Commission (Horizon 2020). More information about the *Children Born of War - Past, Present, and Future* project can be found on the website www.chibow.org. The reflections presented here are also the core of the methodological chapter of the dissertation *in statu nascendi*.

² Lynn Abrams, the author of the book of, in my opinion, a sounding like an oxymoron title *Oral History Theory*, compares oral history to “broad church,” whose members are practitioners of great diversity, which share only very general assumptions (Abrams 2016:8). Franka Maubach writes straightforwardly that there is no such thing as methodology of oral history, referring to the techniques of acquiring narration she says: “There are as many methods as interviewers” (Maubach 2011:45). The same applies to methods of analysis. In this sense, it seems more appropriate to describe oral history as a research practice. This approach is supported by oral history classical authors, who in their publications mainly rely on their own experience of conducting interviews (including Passerini 1987, 1996, Portelli 1991, 1997, 2003, 2011, 2017, Thompson 1978, Thomson 2011).

or use the method of autobiographical narrative interview developed by Fritz Schütze and practiced by his disciples also in Poland.³ A visible overlap of these two research perspectives in Polish literature over the past dozen or so years only strengthened these hesitations (Filipkowski 2010, Kurkowska-Budzan 2009, 2011, Kudela-Świątek 2011, 2013; 2014a; 2014b, Wylegała 2014, Stolarz 2016, Kałwa 2017). At the same time, the creators of both research approaches, as well as researchers, most of all European ones,⁴ who started their activity in the 1970s and 1980s - the breakthrough period in the humanities, clearly separated them from each other, seeing in them ideas that were close to each other, but still separate (Bertaux 1981; Thompson 1981, Thompson, Bornat 2017⁵). These mutual relationships and interactions are the subject of this article.

First of all, at the beginning, I had to answer the question what actually the goal of this research

³ In the 1970s Fritz Schütze developed a comprehensive method of acquiring life stories (based on spontaneous, continuous, not interrupted by a researcher narrative, *off-the-cuff storytelling* and *extempore storytelling*) and their detailed analysis, based primarily on sociolinguistic knowledge and discourse analysis. In this way, the recorded biographical material is the basis for the research on the relationships that occur between biographical individuals and collective social phenomena. He developed this method and described it in the following years of his scientific activity (Schütze 1978, 1981, 1983, 1990, 1992a, 1992b, 2008, 2012). An interesting text, to which I will refer a few times, is the recording of the interview that Schütze gave to Kaja Kaźmierska, published in the *Qualitative Sociology Review* on his 70th birthday, where he talked about his research path and basic assumptions of his own concept (Kaźmierska 2014a).

⁴ For American oral historians, oral history had a much broader meaning and most of all they emphasized its interdisciplinary character (Dunaway, Brown 1996).

⁵ As far as *The Voice of the Past* is concerned, in most cases in this text I refer to the latest, fourth edition of this book, co-authored by Joanna Bornat. When I want to indicate changes in Thompson’s approach to oral history I point to earlier editions of his book (Thompson 1978, 1988, 2000). Introductions of two previous editions are re-printed in the third edition of the books, which allows one to see main differences.

was. And also, what and how I wanted to show through the collected accounts, which are only a part of all acquired sources, not only biographical ones. Was it going to be a description of CBOW as a little-known social phenomenon based on biographical processes analysis placed in a broader social context or a kind of “an illustration” to events and phenomena described on the basis of other sources? Or maybe a kind of intervention, where the representatives of a marginalized group have the chance to fight for their place in history? Finally, for many reasons, which I will write about in the further part of the text, I am in favor of oral history, not only because I am more efficient in this field, but because in my opinion this approach corresponds more fully to the research objectives which in time crystallized on the basis of a well-established theory and with a growing source base. In the analysis of my interviews, however, I use some of the tools and analytical categories created by Schütze, because they allow, like no other instrumentarium, to describe phenomena and regularities that can be observed in the biographies of my interlocutors. However, I do not consider them to be a part of oral historian workshop, because these tools were created within a different paradigm, a different research tradition.

This is how I understand interdisciplinarity – as the conscious use of tools assigned to different disciplines, without appropriating them. However, I have the impression that oral history without clearly defined boundaries has such tendencies. Dobrochna Kałwa wrote about the “epistemological heterogeneity” of oral history as about an element that distinguishes it in the field of humanistic re-

search on the most recent history (Kałwa 2017:174).⁶ I believe that this feature of oral history can be the reason for theoretical and methodological misunderstandings.

At the same time, I believe that Schütze’s method is a completely separate, autonomous analytical concept of acquiring and analyzing biographical materials, and not one of the methods of interpreting interviews within oral history. Both approaches (apart from many similarities and common points) differ fundamentally from each other, which is, first of all, visible in relation to the interlocutor manifested in different scientific goals set by the researchers, which will be discussed in detail.

This text is also a reference to two articles by Kaja Kaźmierska, in which she juxtaposes both perspectives, from the position of a sociologist, promoter of biographical method in the perspective of Fritz Schütze, and is a response to her invitation to discuss the ethical dimension of broadly understood research on life stories (Kaźmierska 2014, Kaźmierska 2018). During the discussion at the conference

⁶ Kałwa also writes about the “nomadic mobility” of oral historians who borrow tools for analyzing interviews (Kałwa 2017:176). On the other hand, Lynn Abrams refers to the concept of “theoretical promiscuity” in relation to the way oral historians make use of different theoretical perspectives and borrow analytical concepts (Abrams, 2016:3). In the same text, Kałwa also recalls, in this context, the *bricolage technique*, as an optimal approach for the oral historians research practice. Other Polish historians also wrote about *bricolage* (Kurkowska-Budzan 2009, Kudela-Świątek 2014b). However, it seems, that by using the term they do not mean the same as Kaja Kaźmierska, who refers to the research concept from the perspective of Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln (Denzin, Lincoln, 1994, 2009 after Kaźmierska 2010) and warns against “postmodern manner of merging [theoretical] frames and sources.” (Kaźmierska 2010:224). In my opinion, the boundary between versatility (according to Denzin’s concept) and dilettantism in this context is very thin and largely depends on the self-awareness, sensitivity, and competence of the researcher.

in Spała we agreed that despite all, it is worth defining the common discourse framework, as well as differences stemming from diversity of the perspectives, with regard to the assumptions of still popular interdisciplinarity, and not because of scientific purity of scientific disciplines. We recognized that misinterpreted interdisciplinarity leads to a dangerous blurring of borders, creating a specific “grey zone” where everything is allowed (e.g., theoretical or methodological ignorance), which in consequence manifests itself in a decrease in the level of actions that is a nightmare of both oral history and biographical method.⁷ Therefore, my goal is not to set boundaries, but to point to the importance of theoretical and methodological self-awareness of researchers working with life stories and memories.

Context / Research

The doubts that appeared during the research on CBOW in Poland became, for me, a stimulus for a deeper reflection on the theory and methodology. They were supposed to be based on the corpus of archival sources, giving insight into the activities and attitudes of various political and social actors (e.g., Polish communist authorities, the Catholic Church, etc.) towards the study group, as well as on biographical materials that allow touching a slightly different, personal and thus deeper dimension of this phenomenon. This topic remained unexplored, among other reasons because of the silence that covered this group of people, which could be a result of ambiguous assessments with regard to their moth-

⁷ Kaja Kaźmierska wrote about the phenomenon of mistakenly understood interdisciplinarity in her article on ethical dilemmas in biographical research (Kaźmierska 2018).

ers, on the one hand, suspected of being acquainted with the enemy and on the other being victims of sexual violence. All this introduced the subject of children born in the above-mentioned circumstances to the taboo sphere, therefore it was necessary to enter the field and to reach appropriate sources in the archives and representatives of the researched group to complete the empirical material for analysis. Apart from an important and multifaceted factor, which was the international context of the conducted research, various recommendations and requirements from the grant giver and project coordinators, I will just mention that *oral history* was the basic research method.

In my case, such a methodological assumption very quickly became problematic, and not only because I found the first person who agreed to talk to me after a year of searching, but because her motivation to contact me was the feeling of being hurt by participating in another scientific project and the willingness to tell me about this difficult experience. My second interlocutor was in a similar situation, the main character of a reportage based on a journal interview. Both women found it difficult to face the interpretations of their lives made by third parties: a researcher and a journalist. In this context, the question about the method of analysis has become urgent to me.⁸ At the end of the second year of the

⁸ In the first case, the interview was anonymized, but still the interviewee recognized herself in the text of the book and felt deeply touched by the interpretation which by the way, in my opinion, was just. However, it destroyed the sense which the narrator gave to the relationship between her parents justifying her existence in this way. It did not matter to her that this fragment was entirely masked. It can be argued that while giving an interview may (but does not have to) have positive effects on the interlocutor, the confrontation with the researcher's interpretation may not. As much as I understand Schütze's argument that researchers have the right to their own

research, I had only four accounts, and only at the very end of the research period there was an unexpected response to much-earlier calls for participants published in the press. As a result, at the moment the entire collection of recordings comprises sixteen interviews,⁹ which is the basis for analysis.

Apart from difficulties connected with the recruitment of potential interviewees,¹⁰ my attention turned to the attitude the people contacting me had to their own biographies (or possibly biographies of their relatives¹¹), as well as their motivations and expectations. First of all, most people wanted to remain anonymous for various reasons. Most often it resulted from the fear of being recognized by their relatives or local community in which they lived, which would be related with the need to confront their reactions to the revealed biography and origin. Secondly, almost everyone had various, sometimes very specific, expectations from me connected, for example, with help in

interpretations, and that the measure of their honesty is a readiness to present this analysis to the interlocutor, as well as showing how they came to such conclusions, assuming that this interpretation may differ from the narrator's opinion on his/her life story (Każmierska 2014a), there is still an unsolved issue of the possibility of hurting such a person, which eventually may have unforeseen consequences. We may assume that our interlocutor will not come across this article or book, but it is not clear what to do if he/she does. Still, oral history interviews, published in whole or in fragments under the names of the interlocutors, make the question about the limits of interpretation even more important.

⁹ I also include five interviews conducted by Maren Röger (Röger 2015, for Polish translation 2016)

¹⁰ In the Western research on CBOW, this group is treated as a so-called hidden population, whom one may contact through more or less formalized support groups or associations of people born because of war. It functions this way in Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Germany, and Austria. In Poland, however, such organizations do not exist, and I had no other way of finding interlocutors, but to place a call for participants in the media in the form of appeals, articles, or press interviews.

¹¹ During the project, I came across thirty life stories of people born in the circumstances I was studying, and in about half of the cases children or grandchildren of potential interlocutors contacted me.

searching for their fathers or the "proper" presentation of their life stories (not revealed before). The negative experience of my first two interviewees, as well as the two other factors mentioned above, became the starting point for a deeper reflection on the choice of a research approach and the method. However, the most important was the course of most of the meetings and the interviews themselves, which were far from the "ideal" that I pursued following Schütze's guidelines (Schütze 1983, Kaźmierska 1996). The research reality made me confront the material of extremely sensitive character and with the exceptional vulnerability of my interview partners, mainly in the ethical, but also epistemological dimension. The reflection which was born at that time accompanied me especially during the analysis of the collected material, when I had to and still have to make methodological and ethical choices.

Tangled Roots

To clarify my uncertainty or even a split in terms of methodology, I would like to introduce an autobiographical motif, which in my opinion is important for further consideration. I came across *oral history* in the last year of historical studies at the Jagiellonian University (2005/2006), where I had the opportunity to participate in classes devoted to this research practice,¹² in the international *oral history*¹³

¹² At that time Dobrochna Kałwa ran classes entitled "Oral History in the historian's workshop" and they were the first such classes in Poland. At the same university from the second half of the nineties, Marta Kurkowska-Budzan dealt with oral history, and the first publications on the history of oral history and texts based on interviews were written there (Kurkowska 1998; Kurkowska-Budzan 2003, 2009; Kałwa 2006).

¹³ The workshop was called: "Argument and Biography." *Interdisciplinary International Workshop on the History of Concentration Camp Prisoners* and was carried out by the Jagiellonian Uni-

workshop, and a year later at the first conference in Poland exclusively devoted to this subject, where many people who use oral sources in their academic work and social activity came, including Alessandro Portelli.¹⁴ Fascinated by this unusual opportunity to make history I began a long-term cooperation with the KARTA Center in Warsaw which is considered to be a precursor in popularizing oral history in Poland and at the same time has the largest and most diverse, in terms of subject matter, archive of recordings. The aim of our activities as part of numerous documentation projects was to record the history of past generations by recording “biographical interviews,” as we called them at that time and to create an archive accessible not only for the academic environment, but also for anyone interested in history told in biographies of ordinary people. Our work was accompanied by popularization campaigns in the form of exhibitions (e.g., with excerpts from audio and / or video recordings) or the publication of extracts of memories. We were not interested in a deeper analysis of the acquired content, we tried to give the voice to the narrators themselves, whom we considered to be “witnesses of history.”¹⁵ Meanwhile, at that time the inspirations of the German-speaking circle of researchers could be observed in documentary activities, which

resulted from the participation of representatives of the Center in large documentary international projects¹⁶ where biographical and narrative interviews were recorded, referring to *oral history* tradition. To a large extent, the very technique of conducting the interview resembled the assumptions proposed by Fritz Schütze and his disciples.¹⁷ Undoubtedly, however, since then the name of the German sociologist appeared in the context of trainings in the technique of conducting interviews as a part of the KARTA documentary “Oral History” program. I myself came across it in such circumstances. In my opinion this tendency was additionally strengthened by Piotr Filipkowski, one of the Center’s employees at that time, who made an attempt to analyze parts of the interviews recorded in the MSDP project and made it his doctoral dissertation, published in 2010 under the title: *Oral History and War* (Filipkowski 2010). In this publication the influence of sociological perspective is dominant due to the discipline represented by the author, and in my opinion this approach to oral history was formative for Polish researchers using oral sources in their scientific work and determined their perception of this research practice.¹⁸ Hence, among historians, biographical method (mainly from the German sociologist’s perspective) was recognized as one of the

versity, the University of Bielefeld and the International Youth Meeting Center in Oświęcim.

¹⁴ “Oral History - The Art of Dialogue” conference took place in Kraków, November 8-10, 2007. Alessandro Portelli is a retired professor of American literature who worked for the University of Rome *La Sapienza* for many years.

¹⁵ Such a practice of oral history was consistent with its basic assumptions as a social or civic movement (Bornat 1989, Thompson, Bornat 2017) and the function of “engaged history,” also called “rescue history” (Domańska 2014, Filipkowski 2014). At the same time, it was in agreement with the specificity of Central-European oral history, with its political dimension (Kałwa 2010).

¹⁶ These were the *Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project* (MSDP 2002-2003) and the *International Slave and Forced Laborers Documentation Project* (ISFLD, 2005-2006).

¹⁷ In this context the impact of Alexander von Plato seems to be interesting on the interview technique in the project on forced laborers, of which he was the coordinator.

¹⁸ The author tries to separate these two perspectives, distinguishing, as he calls it, biographical sociology from oral history and placing Schütze in the first stream (Filipkowski 2010). In another text, however, he notes that although they are separate and independent traditions, they “enter into easy alliances with one another” (Filipkowski 2015a: 100) and he sometimes merges them himself (Filipkowski 2010, 2015b).

ways of practicing *oral history* (Kurkowska-Budzan 2011, Lewandowska 2011, Kudela-Świątek 2011, Stolarz 2016). Not without significance for this tendency was also establishing contacts among historians and sociologists (also representatives of other disciplines and employees of several non-governmental organizations) on the forum of the Polish Oral History Association (PTHM) that was established at that time (2009).

In my opinion, the factors mentioned above determined the ontological character of oral history in Poland and influenced its “epistemological heterogeneity.” And this, in time, contributed to blurring of the borders or the sharpness of contours defining the identity of both approaches. As a result, the KARTA Center recorded interviews with “witnesses of history,” referring to the Schütze method, and at the Department of Sociology of Culture at the University of Lodz the Biographical and Oral History Studies Center was created which somehow legitimized projects and publications (also the past ones) that fit more into oral history than biographical research.¹⁹ In this context, I consider submitting the candidacy of Fritz Schütze, who significantly distances himself from oral history as a research

¹⁹ The first such initiative of the researchers from Lodz was the project of recording life stories of the professors of the University of Lodz, which were later published in extensive fragments as their memories (Kaźmierska, Waniek, Zysiak 2015). The second one was the publication of memories of former soldiers of the Polish People’s Army, recorded as a part of the project by the KARTA Center (Kaźmierska, Pałka 2018). It is worth noting that the Polish oral historians often place the project “Biography and national identity” run by the Department of Sociology of Culture in 1992-1994 (Czyżewski, Piotrowski, Rokuszewska-Pawełek 1996) in the *oral history* tradition (e.g., Kudela-Świątek 2011, Kurkowska-Budzan 2009, Kałwa 2017, Lewandowska 2011).

practice as an honorary PTHM member in 2016²⁰ symbolic.

The fact is that sociologists are more likely to undertake historical topics in their research, remaining within their own discipline and using their own rich instrumentation (unless they work on the materials obtained as a part of oral history projects²¹) than historians introduce biographical method into their own workshop using, for example, the method of autobiographical narrative interview (which in my opinion is mainly due to the lack of theoretical and methodological preparation of the latter).²²

²⁰ In the conversation with Kaja Kaźmierska he talked about requirement of anonymity, referring to interviews recorded in oral history practice: “Then, the interview acquires a slightly different quality: to a certain degree it loses its deep focus on one’s personal biography proper; instead, it tends into the direction of a memoir as a description of interesting encounters, social milieus, social worlds, and episodes of a general humanistic quality. Such a tendency I do not like very much”; I also had the opportunity to talk to him about it at one of the biographical seminars in Lodz in 2017.

²¹ This interest of sociologists in history was explained in an interesting way by the editors of *The Turn to the Biographical Method in Social Science*, seeing it as a counterweight to post-modernism. They call this *counter-movement* a historical turning point in social sciences, which is about recognizing that to understand ourselves and others we must first understand our own story and how we have become who we are today (Chamberlayne, Bornat, Wengraf 2005). In Poland, its examples may be doctoral dissertations by Anna Wylegała and Piotr Filipkowski, they are partially based on interviews conducted as part of the documentary activities of the KARTA Center and stored in the Oral History Archives at the Dom Spotkań z Historią in Warsaw (Filipkowski 2010, Wylegała 2014).

²² Above all the books by Piotr Oseka *My, ludzie z Marca: autoportret pokolenia ‘68 (We, people of March: a self-portrait of the ‘68 generation)* is worth mentioning. It is based on interviews with representatives of this generation. When it comes to the methodology, the author refers to both Italian oral historian Luisa Passerini and her definition of the generation (1996), as well as to Fritz Schütze and his method (Oseka 2015). An important comment to this publication is the critical text by Andrzej Czyżewski, which appeared in *Kwartalnik Historyczny* and treats about the use of the method of the German sociologist by Oseka (Czyżewski 2016). In my opinion, the diagnosis made by Czyżewski may refer to a more widely applied intuitive way of practicing oral history that manifests itself, among others in freedom in the selection of methods chosen by historians, which is later identified with interdisciplinarity.

Introducing methodological “novelties” to the historian’s workshop in the academic environment is welcomed rather critically. Hence, even scientific works based on oral sources are marginal, quite like the works of sociologists moving in the field of biographical research (which paradoxically in number is inversely proportional to the number of biographical and documentary books that flood the reading market confirming the popularity of this type of literature). Undoubtedly, this marginalization, as well as a kind of methodological chaos is a common feature of both approaches (Kaźmierska 2013). Despite its recognized position as primarily civic activity,²³ and to a lesser extent as a research practice, *oral history* obtained the status of a separate scientific discipline only in some countries.²⁴ This is especially true of the United Kingdom and the United States, where the largest debates with the participation of researchers from other European countries (mainly from Italy²⁵) took place, and which were crucial for

the development of *oral history* in the world.²⁶ However, these were Anglo-Saxon universities which, as the first ones, found the space for the research projects based on interviews and opened their archives in which they were later stored.²⁷ In various countries, in different cultures, *oral history* is practiced in different ways, it is enough to mention the approaches indicated by Paul Thompson in the latest issue of pioneering *The Voice of the Past* (Thompson, Bornat 2017) or paradigms distinguished by Alistair Thomson (2006). Contrary to the author’s conviction about the processuality of the development of oral history, it seems that, as Piotr Filipkowski notices, these developmental stages “do not follow one another in a chronological order (...), the emergence of a new paradigm does not eradicate the old one. On the contrary, they overlap, coexist parallelly” (Filipkowski 2015:96). Until today, regardless of any great turning points in the humanities, in many scientific

²³ Oral history as a kind of activism is most of all seen in the form of projects concerning local communities, especially degraded, forgotten (so-called *community projects*, Shopes 2002) or marginalized or discriminated groups and may even take the form of a *campaign for social change* (Thomson 2006: 68). In Poland, such projects are primarily run by non-governmental organizations and cultural institutions, including the KARTA Center (Ośrodek KARTA), The Grodzka Gate - NN Theater Center (Brama Grodzka – Teatr NN), Zajezdnia History Center (Centrum Historii Zajezdnia), The Dobrowola Foundation or Lambda Association.

²⁴ The first Master’s Degree program in the field of oral history (*Oral History Master of Arts Program*) was created at Columbia University in New York, where there is also the oldest institution practicing oral history (*Columbia Center for Oral History Research*, CCOHR) and one of the largest archives of recordings in the USA (*Columbia Center for Oral History Archives*, CCOHA) forming the *Columbia University Center for Oral History* (CCOH), an institution operating within the *Interdisciplinary Center for Innovative Theory and Empirics* (INCITE), <https://www.incite.columbia.edu/ccohr/>.

²⁵ Next to Alessandro Portelli, Luisa Passerini had an undeniable influence on the development of oral history - a historian of culture, a retired professor, currently cooperating with the European University in Florence. They both appeared in the field more or less at the same time, in the late 1970s, publishing

their “manifests” for the new research perspective emerging at that time (Passerini 1979, Portelli 1979). Their contribution to the development of oral history prompted Paul Thompson to include their postulates in the second edition of *The Voice of the Past* (1988). Alistair Thomson sees in their activity one of the four paradigmatic transformations that history has undergone (Thomson 2006).

²⁶ Over time oral history broke Euro-Atlantic hegemony thanks to international conferences, common research, and documentation projects or publications. Alistair Thomson stressed the key meaning of “internationalism” in the development of oral history (2006).

²⁷ Among them there are primarily American universities with Yale University and Columbia University in the front row, and in Europe there are British universities, for example, the University of Essex, where there is the *Qualidata* archive created by inter alia Paul Thompson (storing various types of qualitative data, not only interviews). The *Deutsches Gedächtnis* archive at the University of Hagen, Germany has a similar character. It is noteworthy that Italian researchers with a significant place in the history of *oral history* did not find institutional support for their actions. There are also no archives of *oral history* at Polish universities, but this is rather due to lack of such research projects, and those who carry them out either keep acquired recordings in their own drawer or transfer them to already existing archives of oral history as separate collections. Larger archives are within cultural institutions, such as museums or memorial sites.

cultures recorded oral history (often called a testimony) is treated only as information about facts and is criticized like any other historical source, which is exactly the way Paul Thompson considered it at the beginning (1978). At the same time, there are other approaches, for example, the ones based on the conviction that through narration we have access to someone's experience, as in the German concept of *Erfahrungsgeschichte* (Niethammer 1983, Niethammer, von Plato 1985, von Plato 1998, 2009, Freund 2009) to the ascertainment, that it is only a construction, and it rather comprises the memory of experiences with the meanings given to them (Passerini 1979, Portelli 1979, 1981, 1991). Similar dilemmas can also be observed among social researchers in the field of biographical research, which can be seen in the approaches of the "German school" or the "French school."²⁸ At the same time, it is worth noting that the representatives of these schools rarely identify their practice with oral history. Neither Daniel Bertaux²⁹ on the one hand, nor Fritz Schütze

²⁸ I use these terms bearing in mind the discussion that took place in the biographical researchers' community at the end of the 1990s. Gabriele Rosenthal and Wolfram Fisher-Rosenthal argued in a polemic with Daniel Bertaux that differentiating scientific research in national categories may result in blocking international cooperation (Bertaux 1997 [2005], Fisher-Rosenthal, Rosenthal 1997 [2005]). This is the context in which German sociologists Lena Inowlocki and Ursula Apitzsch, who are in favor of Schütze's method, clearly distanced themselves from calling the interview analysis method used by him "German school" (Apitzsch, Inowlocki 2000). In such an approach Kaja Kaźmierska sees a kind of "escape" from the "infamous perspective of nationalism" (Kaźmierska 2012:109).

²⁹ Due to the fact that he cooperated with Thompson for many years and they wrote publications together, he is perceived as an oral historian, although I am not convinced if he would put himself in this tradition, even though at some point he even took part in regularly held *International Oral History Association* (IOHA) conferences, where contacts with oral historians were largely on social and friendly grounds (Leo, Maubach 2013). But, in *Biography and Society*, for example, oral history appeared as one of the ways of practicing research on *life story approach*, which, thanks to their reconstruction served, among others to research so-called "social change" and social mobility (Thomp-

son 1981). Bertaux saw in oral history a research field for social historians, who thanks to this additional source, through their conversations with older people can learn about their everyday life, both in the family and at work (Bertaux 1981). In later years, both Bertaux and Thompson dealt mainly with family history and intergenerational transmissions in various social contexts (Bertaux, Thompson 1993, Bertaux, Rotkirch, Thompson 2004). In the last publication they define themselves as a "*western life-story sociologist*" and an "*oral historian*" (Bertaux et al., 2004:7). Bertaux presented his concept of biographical research in full in the book *Le Récit de Vie* (Bertaux 2006).

or Gabriele Rosenthal on the other hand refer to this tradition³⁰ in their texts, on the contrary, they root their practice in social sciences, which does not prevent them from using methods and concepts that belong to other disciplines (e.g., psychology³¹) and meeting oral historians on the pages of the most famous journal devoted to biographical research, oral history and life story research in Germany.³²

So, how did it happen that both traditions, oral history and biographical research penetrated each other so much that they were once mentioned in one breath, as if they were one and the same, and at other times we can read that one of them is actually a part of the other and vice versa?³³ In addition to the above-mentioned factors that played a key role

³⁰ Rosenthal published her texts in journals dedicated to oral history, but it should not be concluded that she sets up her research in this field (Rosenthal 1989, 1991).

³¹ An interesting example in this mosaic of different research approaches is scientific activity of social psychologist Dan Bar-On, who, inspired by Gabriele Rosenthal's research, conducted many biographical interviews with Germans and Israelis. I think, he also would not put his research into oral history tradition, although his interviews refer to past experience (Bar-On 1989, 1995).

³² *BIOS -Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung, Oral History und Lebensverlaufsanalysen* - a scientific journal connected with the University of Hagen (*Institut für Geschichte und Biographie*) issued since 1987.

³³ Bertaux (1981), Roberts (2002), Rosenthal (2012) and in Poland, for example, Stolarz (2016) on the one hand, and Kaźmierska (2018) on the other hand place oral history in a broadly understood biographical study. On the contrary, as I have already mentioned, Polish researchers see in biographical methods of practicing oral history (Kurkowska-Budzan 2011, Kudela-Świątek 2011).

in Poland, I would look for sources of this in other countries and earlier times –namely, in Great Britain and Germany at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s.³⁴ British *oral history* and *oral history* in general owes its development to Paul Thompson, a professor of sociology at the University of Essex, whose long-term scientific activity as a social historian and sociologist has left its mark on research based on interviews first, in Great Britain and then in an international dimension. In the interview with Karen Worcman in 1996 within the *Pioneers of Social Research, 1996-2012* project, he admitted that for the realization of his first major *oral history* project carried out in the spirit of *history from below*, he derived the knowledge from traditional sociology: “We’d learnt the technique, primarily, from sociological methods books. There were no history methods books at all, obviously.” At the same time, he recognized the significant influence of the ethnographer George Ewart Evans, who represented a very open approach to an interview: “You’ve got to listen to people. That is the key thing. You should never interrupt.” You know, “You’ve got to hear them.” This led him to position himself half way “between a structured interview with a set of questions, and a completely unstructured interview” (Thompson 1996). “What I then did is halfway between the structured interview with a set of questions, and the completely unstructured interview. The way I see it is that the guide is there as a list of topics, and you’ve got to know the guide, and know that you need to cover those topics. But you do an interview which

³⁴ I do not refer here to development of biographical research in the wider international context, which since the 1970s was associated with the revival of the Chicago School in the USA. I also omit a detailed description of the research in this field in Europe.

follows what the speaker is saying.” The British researcher never questioned the biographical approach to interview, his texts were always about life stories. Nevertheless, as far as the analysis is concerned, he was in favor of a positivist criticism of the source (his attempt to prove that the oral source is not less reliable than the written one, which is often only a record of an oral message became well-known) and the first edition of *The Voice of the Past* is of such nature (1978) “So the first edition of *The Voice of the Past* is very much a positivistic work. There is mention about rumors, the importance of rumors, and people re-formulating their memories, but it’s a terribly minor part of it, and the main argument is the positive value of these memories, and whether or not they’re reliable, and how you decide whether or not they’re reliable. That was the research tradition I was coming from, essentially a social scientific one” (Thompson 1996). It was only influence of Italian oral historians that changed his perception of oral accounts and opened him up to issues such as memory, subjectivity (and authenticity) or relationality. Apart from his work in *Oral History Society* and editing *Oral History*³⁵ magazine his further scientific career was related to *life story approach*, *trans-generational interviews approach*, mainly in collaboration with Daniel Bertaux (Bertaux, Thompson 1993; Bertaux et al., 2004), with research on the phenomenon of getting old (Thompson, Itzin, Abendstern 1990) and finally, the re-use of qualitative data.³⁶ In my

³⁵ *Oral History Society* is the oldest oral history organization in Europe and in 1973, the year when it was created it took the patronage over *Oral History* magazine, which was first published in 1971.

³⁶ In the interview quoted above, Thompson mentioned failed collaboration with Luisa Passerini in the late 1970s, which may have determined his stronger relationship with the French biographical researchers. At the same time, he shared their view

opinion, this swing towards sociology, and above all, cooperation with the French scholars had an impact on the subsequent perception of biographical methods as a possibility of practicing oral history, which manifested itself, in the fact that Daniel Bertaux and his achievements are frequently identified with oral history.³⁷ Certainly, it was because Thompson extended his considerations on diversity of oral history with typically sociological methods functioning as part of biographical research.³⁸ In this context, the names of Schütze and Rosenthal also appear in the third edition of *The Voice of the Past* (2000). In the fourth edition, the author presents them as “an organized network of theoretically and methodologically innovative life story sociologists,” who have developed an intensive “hermeneutical” method, the “narrative interview” or “autobiographical interview.” In my opinion, however, Thompson incorrectly equates the emergence of this method with the crisis that hit the post-war generation of German people in relation to their Nazi past and the

concerning the objective social reality that can be reconstructed, and the belief that to some extent an insight into someone else’s experience is possible. He was never entirely seduced by the postmodern thought, which in the end he considered destructive: “But I haven’t moved as far as the post-modern position, where people argue that everything is subjective, and there is, therefore, no point in thinking that you are doing any kind of research which has a real relation to something that happened in the past. Because I think that’s a totally self-destructive position. I would argue that it’s always very difficult to know what’s happened in the past, and in a way, it’s a delusion to imagine that you can get to what really happened, but if you work in a genuine social scientific way, you can get nearer to understanding what it was like in the past” (Thompson 1996).

³⁷ In a certain sense Thompson confirmed it in the introduction to the second edition of his book: “we have developed firmer links with life-story sociology, and we have joined together to form an international community of oral historians” (Thompson 2000: VIII). As mentioned before IOHA conferences have been a platform for these interdisciplinary encounters (Leo, Maubach 2013).

³⁸ The method review is most widely presented in the latest edition of his iconic book (Thompson, Bornat 2017).

problems to talk about the past with the oldest generation of Germans, who were automatically to a larger or lesser extent entangled in that system. He mentions the text of Schütze about the pressure and guilt of a “young German soldier” (Schütze 1992a, 1992b),³⁹ in which, in his opinion, the German sociologist developed the method of narrative interview confronting himself with the difficult heritage (Thompson, Bornat 2017:90-91).⁴⁰ At the same time, he stresses that many ideas contained in this method are “directly relevant to oral history interviewing” (Thompson, Bornat 2017:90). But, he does not write anywhere that it is one of the ways to practice oral history. At the same time, he puts Schütze in

³⁹ The first version of this text, as it can be read in the footnote to its latest translation into Polish, was presented in 1985 at the *Biographical analysis in sociology* conference and was published in this language in an anthology of texts devoted to the biographical method (Włodarek, Ziółkowski 1990). Recently, the text was re-translated by Katarzyna Waniek and constitutes a chapter of the book entitled *Biography and War* (Dopierała, Waniek 2016). English version of the text, to which Thompson refers, appeared in 1992.

⁴⁰ Many years after he had developed the method of autobiographical narrative interview, Fritz Schütze focused on the topic of the past of the Germans (and the past in general) drawing inspiration mainly from symbolic interactionism due to intense contacts with its representatives in the United States. He told Kaja Kaźmierska about his research career, its subsequent stages, as well as influences and inspirations in the already mentioned interview (Kaźmierska 2014a). His first projects concerned and resulted in texts in which he fully explained the assumptions of the techniques he used while conducting an interview and during its detailed analysis. It was only with time, which also resulted from his personal and family experience, that he decided (and felt obliged) to deal with the subject of Nazism. “I felt entitled to do real sociological study after I had established the basic theory of biographical processes and the method of analyzing the autobiographical narrative interviews. I started to do re- search on World War II. When I started to do this, I had no idea that it would have much to do with my own biography, although I had already learned that I could not escape from my existence of being German” - he told Kaźmierska (2014a:324-325). On the other hand, generational change in approach to National Socialism described by Thompson certainly had fundamental significance for German oral history, whose fathers are said to be Lutz Niethammer and Alexander von Plato, and their project concerning life stories of the Ruhrgebiet population, as well as a multi-volume publication based on it are considered classic today (Niethammer 1983, Niethammer, von Plato 1985).

one row with Lutz Niethammer and Alexander von Plato, attributing the technique practiced by the duo of German historians to the first one. In my opinion, Thompson falls into the same trap as many Polish oral historians and because of the surprising (perhaps resulting from borrowing the technique previously developed by Schütze) similarity of the two interview methods combines them under the name “German biographical narrative interview” (Thompson, Bornat 2017: 314).⁴¹ I have not found any information about German oral historians referring to Schütze’s method, quite the contrary, from the very beginning both Lutz Niethammer and Alexander von Plato distanced themselves from his approach, although they basically use the same technique of acquiring interviews, which primarily also included three stages, and only later, prompted by the “field” experience and the need of confronting it with the national socialism heritage, was extended to the fourth stage - discussion with the subjects, and the opportunity given to the researcher to express an opinion and even criticism, thus creating a kind of a safety valve.⁴² They also shared an approach allowing for

an insight into someone’s past experience, although while Schütze was interested in generating a narrative (*extempore storytelling*) whose form would reflect the course of life, German oral historians looked for autobiographical more “accidental memories” or “genuine stories” which would allow the opening of “the past worlds for them” in order to study them thoroughly (Maubach 2011:66). Both approaches assumed that the researcher, thanks to eliciting spontaneous dramatic (stage) narrative told for the first time, had access to authentic experience of the narrator, which by German oral historians was considered “an innocent diamond,” created just for interpretation (Maubach 2011:63). However, von Plato himself questioned the principle of *homology* promoted by Schütze, considering it imprecise (and not confirmed in other studies), as among other things it does not take into account references to memory and complicated processes which take place between memory and what happens during an interview (von Plato 2009). Both approaches set completely different research goals. However, the fact is, that in the German environment an interesting fusion of research approaches to biography took place, manifesting itself, for example, in the works of the Institut für Geschichte und Biographie at the University of Hagen. On the pages of the *BIOS* magazine published there, which in its title already includes biographical research, oral history, and life cycle research, researchers of various scientific disciplines and research perspectives publish their

⁴¹ Franka Maubach writes in detail about both of these approaches to interviews and their analysis in the text on German *oral history* (Maubach 2011).

⁴² Plato calls this kind of an interview *half-open narrative life history interview* (von Plato 2009:20), which like an autobiographical narrative interview in its ideal version should consist of three parts (in simplification: narrative, questions about the narrative, additional questions about descriptions and arguments) and can be extended by the stage of possible confrontation with the views of the interlocutor. Such a formula, and definitely a different approach to the issue (and the character) of interview questions differentiates these techniques from each other. Possible questions in Schütze’s technique are above all to help stimulate the narrative potential of the interlocutor and induce further spontaneous narrative (Schütze 2012:239-241). Niethammer introduced the “change of the course of memories” procedure, whose aim is to direct the interlocutor to topics desired by the researcher, as well as mechanisms “which allow control of the credibility of the narrative and instantly criticize the source” (Maubach 2011:61). It should be remembered that for German oral historians the narrators were first

and foremost “witnesses of history” or “contemporary witnesses” (*Zeitzeuge*) and this term is most often used in German *oral history* referring to an interview partner. At the same time, it is worth noting that this specificity contributed to completely different development of oral history in Germany, whose practice differs significantly from that in other countries.

texts. In my opinion, however, like in the case of French sociologists from Bertaux, German biographical sociologists seldom refer their research to oral history, while oral historians greatly derive from their achievements and eagerly refer to them. Therefore, in my opinion, there is a one way transfer of knowledge and in this sense, German biographical studies are much more autonomous than oral history practiced there. Difficulties related to terminology also play an important role here, its organization could be a reference point to inter-, trans-, cross- and, above all, multi-disciplinary research. Daniel Bertaux already noticed this “terminological confusion” in biographical studies in the introduction to his *Biography and Society* (1981): “there is a certain terminological confusion in the field” (Bertaux 1981:7), especially in relation to such terms as *life story*, *life history* or *autobiography*.⁴³ Thompson, in the third edition of *The voice of the Past*, decided not to include either definition of oral history or life story in order to appreciate interdisciplinarity,⁴⁴ but in the last edition, again he tries to define them indicating their three overlapping forms and mixing them together (2017:VIII). Schütze considers terminological

⁴³ He pointed out that even in the volume he edited, the authors *following customary use* employ the same concepts in different meanings, and vice versa, they use various terms interchangeably (Bertaux 1981). He himself refers to the term *life story* as the first and basic point of reference, common to many disciplines that practice acquiring stories about life. Following Denzin (1970) he juxtaposes the term *life story* with *life history* which including a told story of life additionally supplemented by other sources constitutes an orderly version. Gabriele Rosenthal, for instance, refers to these terms in a different way (2012:281).

⁴⁴ “For while relations between different groups using life-story evidence are generally amicable, one can see in the basic differences in terminology used – oral histories, life (hi)stories, documents of life, personal documents, life documents, life narratives, auto/biographies – and in the differing techniques of analysis, the potential seeds for sectarian fragmentations from which all would be the losers” (Thompson 2000:XI-XII).

issues as “nagging,” claiming that they constitute “a difficult and basic theoretical problem” (Schütze 2012:155). “I would now like to allude to a nagging terminological question that is a difficult basic theoretical problem at the same time” (Schütze 2008:10) and he makes his own distinction of *life course*, *life history*, and *biography*. As a consequence, each researcher creates his own conceptual apparatus. As for oral historians, it seems that they most often use the term *life story*, but it is not accompanied by such a deep theoretical reflection that sociologists undertake. A *life story* is simply a story of life told in an interview situation, becoming *oral history*. And I use the term in such sense.

Towards Subjectivity

I hope, the above considerations will allow us now to go a step further and see how much both research traditions, namely, biographical method and oral history (treated separately, so that none of them is a part of the other) differ fundamentally from each other, especially in the epistemological and ethical dimension. This happens, although the acquired material can be exactly the same. In both approaches, we finally deal with life story of a narrative character, supplemented by the answers (more or less extensive) to the questions raised by the researcher.⁴⁵ What distinguishes each of these approaches can be generally reduced to a difference in research goals. While the task of sociological studies (in this case in the field of biographical research) is, above all, to

⁴⁵ Kaźmierska (2018) pays attention to this similarity, and it seems that this may also be the reason for the phenomenon noted by Filipkowski: “in practice it probably happens, that the same research work may exist under different banners” (2010:27).

generate hypotheses and theories in a macro-social perspective in which, as Fritz Schütze said "one central research focus is on the various relationships between biographical identity and collective phenomena" (Każmierska 2014a:337), in oral history it is about an individual and individual life story, which is a value in itself, with the experience, also the experience entangled in the history of a family and a social group, as well as a local, regional, national, or global one. Most often it concerns the so-called ordinary people who historians were not interested in before (*history from below*) or groups previously marginalized, discriminated or simply invisible (*hidden population*). As Kaźmierska writes that sociologists may also use autobiographical narrative interviews for many other purposes, such as didactic, as an illustration for specific phenomena, and they may also be treated as so-called portrait cases "illustrating" «the model» mapping of specific social processes and biographical experience becoming "like Józef K. a multi-faceted and multidimensional case study" (Każmierska 2014c:232-233).

Defining these basic differences after a prior attempt to break through misunderstandings and inaccuracies resulting from the above-mentioned mixing of perspectives, terms and definitions contributed to my final decision on the choice of methodology. It also helped me to rediscover and appreciate oral history and its potential not only as a method, but also as a kind of human philosophy. I realized that what I perceived as its weak point (lack of a coherent concept of interview analysis) defines its vital potential, because its ultimate goal is not creating a theory, identifying social phenomena, or describing processes, but subjecting and celebrating the

human life story.⁴⁶ Eventually, the most important is not the data itself, but the one who shared it with us, to refer to the fundamental and multidimensional concept of *shared authority*, which was introduced by an American historian Michael Frisch (1990).⁴⁷ However, it was the basis for the way of thinking of a wider group of oral historians both in Europe and in the United States, who appreciated the role of a dialogue in oral history and the importance of relationship between the narrator and the researcher (Passerini 1979, Portelli 1981, 1991, 1997, 2003, 2011, 2017, 2018 Grele 1975, K'Meyer, Crothers 2007, Thomson 2011, Yow 1997), which has been and still is the subject of endless discussions.⁴⁸ This aspect played a particular role in the feminist approach to oral history (Gluck, Patai 1991, Armitage, Hart, Weathermon 2002). In the further part of the text I would like to refer to this feature of oral history which determines its distinctiveness and at the same time, definitely distinguishes it from all other research

⁴⁶ Therefore, the attempts to search (in my opinion, a bit by force) for the theory of oral history are not quite understood by me (Abrams 2016). Maybe because of this central objective oral history did not create any specific analytical apparatus, because the specific instrumentalization of the narrator did not fit into the horizon of expectations set up towards this approach. However, lack of this dimension, does not indicate that it is not a mature research tradition, as it managed to create a far-reaching ability to reflect (critically) on its development and specific self-awareness of researchers. In my opinion, the phenomenon of oral history lies in the organic relation of practice linked to a critical reflection on this practice and its consequences in various dimensions.

⁴⁷ This concept assumes the joint work of a participant and a researcher over the life story acquired in the situation of an interview, which is perceived as its great potential, but also involves numerous moral dilemmas. This concept places a relationship that is formed between the oral historian and the narrator in the center.

⁴⁸ An interesting example of such a "discussion" may be one of the issues of *The Oral History Review* (vol. 30, item 1) devoted exclusively to this topic. There are texts presented by various researchers in Istanbul at the *International Oral History Association* conference in 2000, with a special commentary by Michael Frisch - the author of the concept.

approaches in the wide area of qualitative research. In my opinion, this results from the epistemological position that the oral historians take, which has fundamental ethical implications.

When I wondered what did not allow me to follow Schütze's path, I discovered it was not only a simple consequence of obtaining "unsuccessful" interviews,⁴⁹ but something much deeper, which concerns the essence of the very research on life stories in general. In spite of its complicated structure requiring extensive theoretical preparation biographical method from the German sociologist's point of view created a tempting methodological proposal for me, primarily because of its internal coherence, with a lot of flexibility in its application. This choice was also supported by lack of a similar apparatus in oral history approach, which results in the need to seek help in other disciplines. The analytical categories proposed by Schütze allow to capture the narrative patterns and types of life stories which appear in narratives such as the process structures of a biography and biographical processes or regularities which govern the narrative thus enabling even fuller understanding of individual biographies and more broadly the whole phenomenon. It seemed to me that thanks to this method I would not only be able to learn about life stories of Polish CBOW, but also describe the group I was researching and its specificity. However, the first meeting already verified my assumptions, and the subsequent ones only

⁴⁹ Some of my interlocutors were unable to tell their biographies in a narrative way, which resulted from many different reasons, not only related to the level of education or used vocabulary, but also to the inability to express their deeply hidden experience. Among other authors Marta Kurkowska-Budzan (2009) and Piotr Filipkowski (2015b) wrote about "unsuccessful interviews."

confirmed my belief that the core of this research lies elsewhere. How could I analyze a life story of a person who meeting me was looking for confirmation of his/her own version of the biography, or actually the sense he/she gave to it, which in his/her conviction was undermined by the previous researcher? Do I have the right to this?

Sociologists find a way out of such a situation, using two procedures. First of all, they write down the recorded life story, trying to preserve the narrative as closely as possible (not only "what" is said, but also "how" it is said), secondly, they anonymize it. It is possible only in the written text, but it is the written text (in contrast to oral history) that is the basis for their later analyses, and the recording is used only in case of ambiguity in interpretation of a given piece of the narrative (Każmierska 2014). This is a relatively new and not always applied practice, because until recently storing the recordings of interviews has not been a priority for sociologists, which has been changing and it is seen, for example, in setting up also in Poland quality data archives (Filipkowski 2005; Filipkowski, Straczuk 2014 Kaźmierska 2014, Palska 2005).

Making the acquired biographical material anonymous allows the distancing of oneself to it, as Kaja Kaźmierska writes, allows one to "separate" the story from the man, in the sense that the biography creates a separate text of culture, that can, like any other text, be subjected to criticism (Kaźmierska 2014c:231). In this procedure Kaźmierska also sees a method for "lifting the tension" between the memory of a meeting with a real person and the analysis of his/her written life story, which has become "a case." This is also what she believes is "main-

taining the trust,” assuming that the first and basic promise of the researcher given to the narrator is the guarantee of anonymity (Każmierska 2014c:232). In another place, a researcher from Lodz adds a third advantage of anonymization, based on “symbolic deprivation of the [narrator’s] authorship, when the narrative becomes a research case” (Każmierska 2018:399). “The anonymization has a double meaning here – on one hand, it protects the narrator from being recognized, while on the other hand, it symbolically deprives them of the authorship when the narrative becomes *a case*.” On the one hand, we talk about the specific co-authorship of the narrator (reflected in the narrator’s interpretation, as Schütze and Kaźmierska 2014 wrote) in order to deprive him/her later of this privilege in the name of protecting him/her from being recognized before his/her biography is objectified and reduced to being a research case, which in a form of a written text is subjected to a detailed analysis - “they [the narrators themselves] can hardly imagine what may be done with the text” (Każmierska 2018:400). In my opinion, in this approach a single biography serves only as a means to reach a goal. The narrator is a partner of interaction, because his/her life story can provide knowledge not only about the project, but also about other biographical experience, but then he/she is deprived of the right to it in a sense. All this happens maintaining the “humanistic factor,” which implies giving voice to an individual making him/her anonymous at the same time.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ The concept of “humanistic factor” by Florian Znaniecki, which assumes looking at reality through the eyes of its participants has become a key methodological postulate in social sciences in general, and especially in sociology. Kaźmierska points out that it is particularly visible in Schütze’s approach, specifically in a spontaneous narrative (Każmierska 2018:396).

For me, however, such a solution was not satisfactory, even though my first interview partner (and several others) wanted to remain anonymous. Her experience of confrontation with the researcher’s analysis and the feeling of not being understood, the feeling of being hurt, and maybe even of being betrayed inspired me to give thought to it. Masking the data allowing one to identify the narrator may actually protect him/her from being recognized by other people, but in my opinion, there is no way to hide data or certain biographical details so that the narrator himself does not recognize himself/herself in the written text (anonymization that goes too far loses sense from an analytical point of view, as it distances the researcher from what was unique in a given case). Is a researcher entitled to make a far-reaching analysis, sometimes even having the character of psychological vivisection? I think yes, but under two conditions. This is the moment when we should ask about **the promise** made by the researcher to the interview partner, and if this promise meets expectations of the interviewee towards the researcher. It is possible only when the goal of the research and the way it is carried out is honestly presented, and above all, a clear declaration what we will use this life story for is made. **The promise** coming from one’s own expectations is a response to expectations of the other person. Out of such a meeting of expectations a dialogue is born which on the one hand is a tie (a relationship) and a life story on the other. The dialogue which assumes equality or maybe more adequately striving for equality of both sides, despite all differences that are between them, which manifests itself in *shared authority* and collaboration. Oral history is “an art of a dialogue,” says Alessandro Portelli (1997), and he calls an in-

interview *an experiment in equality* (1991:29-44). It was predominantly he who wrote about the relational character of oral history, placing the meeting with another person in the center of this approach: “a dialogue and experience” and only then everything that results from this comes (Portelli 2018).⁵¹ But, it is necessary to be aware that in some cases it is a responsibility of researcher to limit the interaction and sometimes even stop the research when it does more harm than good. Positioning within a philosophical framework could help and support such choices. Thus, I grant convictions of some social scientists and psychologists referring to the philosophy of critical realism, that special attention should be given when people facing traumatic experiences and therefore being particularly vulnerable to wounds are involved in research (Patel, Pilgrim 2018).⁵² Likewise in critical realists’ concept of *shared understanding* I see some similarities to oral history’s *shared authority*. When doing research on CBO in Poland I had in mind.

The issue of relationship between the researcher and the subject and its consequences has been one of the main topics of epistemological debates among oral historians since the 1980s and a key factor distinguishing oral history from other research approaches. This specific relationship of two people

⁵¹ Marta Kurkowska-Budzan is the author who wrote most about a dialogical character of oral history in Poland (2009, 2011).

⁵² Nimisha Patel as the External Ethics Advisor for the CBO project sensitized us to this issue putting ethics and ethical thinking in the center of our reflection. Her dedication to this topic undoubtedly had a great impact on my research for which I am very grateful to her. It gave me also an impulse to look closer at critical realism through my oral historian’s lances and see how oral history can benefit from this philosophical perspective.

during “an artificial meeting” implies many questions about the mutual influence on each other, the role of emotions in this process and personalities of the participants, their characters and views on various topics and life in general, not to mention such factors as gender, age, education, social status, and many others. All these aspects were omitted in the assumptions of Schütze’s method. They are only developed by Kaźmierska in an article which, in my opinion, is a starting point for a debate on ethical dimension of biographical research (Kaźmierska 2018). The author, however, perceives the interaction that takes place during an interview between a narrator and a researcher in a different way than Portelli does. She emphasizes its asymmetry, which in itself makes an interview situation problematic and ethically ambivalent, exactly on the level of mutual expectations, which in her opinion are irreconcilable, especially when a narrator sees in a researcher an attorney of his/her case and the narrator’s own interpretation of his/her life story is radically different from the researcher’s interpretation.⁵³ Therefore, the

⁵³ Such a situation is a moral dilemma. In my opinion, its resolution depends on the epistemological position that we take, as well as our attitude towards the “production” of knowledge. Who will eventually benefit from the scientific interpretation of a given biography? Are we ready to break the promise given to the narrator “for the sake of science”? Or is it better to exclude such an interview from the collection and not to analyze it? To what extent are we ready to “objectify” acquired life stories so that we can use them as examples or illustrations of some phenomena or processes? Schütze also draws attention to positive effects of telling one’s life story, which may be a form of so-called biographical work: “normally, auto-biographical storytelling is something that is very good for the narrator” (Kaźmierska 2014a:339). This is a very optimistic point of view, but it is necessary to keep in mind that situations such as the reaction of my interlocutor to the researcher’s interpretations read in the book she was waiting for may happen, she had probably expected that in the book the story would be described “in the right way,” which means just as she understands it. In the *oral history* literature, a lot has been written about this type of difficult situations where expectations of narrators and researchers have not met (e.g., Rickard 1998, K Meyer, Crothers 2007).

sense of equality in this exchange of experience may cause only the illusion of symmetrical interaction (Kaźmierska 2018:400). Certainly, the atmosphere of trust and respect for the interlocutor should be built in order to make the interview possible at all. In my opinion, however, the trust, that Kaźmierska writes about in another article is based on the promise - a guarantee of anonymity, a promise of taking part in a research project and the opportunity of "mediated" popularization of the material, which as I understand it, in itself is a kind of recognition for the narrator (Kaźmierska 2014c:232). In this context, the fears of the researcher from Lodz regarding the "exploitive" nature of such an interaction, which by its nature is transitory, but by its intensity can create an illusion of a more permanent relationship are understandable (Kaźmierska 2018:397). Therefore, the last phase of the meeting, which is the "normalization" of the situation in the ethical sense (Kaźmierska 2014c:231-232) is of the key importance to the author.

At the same time, Schütze stresses the necessity of taking a neutral attitude by the researcher, whose task is to have the least possible impact on the emerging life story told by the narrator.⁵⁴ What can help to achieve it is not revealing the details of the project in order to reduce the number of factors that can distort the narrative, which has a chance to reflect the real life of the narrator. This care for making it possible to produce the longest, full narration is understandable in the context of the subsequent analysis, which above all largely concerns this first stage of

the autobiographical narrative interview. The problem starts when, during the meeting, such narratives do not come into being, which may result from many reasons often independent of the researcher and his competences. Then, it is necessary to make compromises, which the very author of the method allows without falling into dogmatism. Many concepts and categories created by him may be applied to autobiographical narrative in general, no matter if it has the form of *life story* or *life history* and is the sum of everything that happened in an interview situation. This dimension is the subject of interest of oral historians who place life story in the context of the meeting and what is outside, which means everything that was *off the record* (Sheftel, Zembrzycki 2013). In retrospect, this is what I consider to be the most important and the most cognitively interesting aspect in the whole research process. Of course, life stories of my interlocutors are fascinating, however they are not the most important for me. The quintessence of my research are those who told me the stories in great trust, as well as the context and circumstances accompanying our meetings, conversations with a cup of coffee and those short meetings, as well as the mail, messages, telephone conversations, also meeting other family members in a few cases, looking at photographs together, reading documents, searching in the archives for information about their parents (some successful ones!). And all the above, as well as my role in this process, the impact these meetings and other research activities had on me and my emotions, is the subject of a detailed analysis. During this particular research I found myself vulnerable as a researcher (but also simply as a human – man, husband, and father) who is hardly prepared to deal neither with one's difficult

⁵⁴ German oral historians also paid attention to this, but their being neutral meant not constraining the "accidental memories," especially those that touch the dark side of human nature, for instance, involvement in the Nazi structures.

memories and traumas nor with extreme and drastic content of archival documents (like for instance testimonies of sexual violence). But, also vulnerable in a way of being exposed to “unexpected,” because a meeting with the Other is always to some extent unpredictable, but also through empathy open to be wounded.⁵⁵

Each of the sixteen meetings had its own dynamics and was unique. Obviously, I did not establish an identical relation with each of the research participants, but each of them left a mark on me, and in each of them I saw fragility, a certain kind of vulnerability and expectation not to be hurt again.⁵⁶ Therefore half of them wished to remain anonymous, but there were also those who in an interview situation felt a certain type of strength or agency that allowed them to break through shame, which manifested itself in the fact they consented to or even expected “the appearance” (testimony!) under their own name and surname. They said that, at that point they had nothing to be ashamed of. And in my opinion, here is the place for **the**

⁵⁵ About this disposition of “being exposed,” Cliff Mayotte wrote in his excellent blog entry, Education Program Director of the Voice of Witness, an American organization advancing human rights by means of oral history (Mayotte, 2015). The concept of vulnerability was also a topic of my paper delivered at ESSHC Conference in Belfast (2018) entitled “When a historian meets vulnerability – methodological and ethical dilemmas from fieldwork.” In that text I developed the idea of “vulnerable researcher” which afterwards met very vivid and inspiring discussion among participants who roughly shared all my concerns. Remarkably, all conversations were of so called “corridor talks” (Yow 1997) in nature.

⁵⁶ Thus, I believe, following Portelli’s thought, that oral history is something more than work or just a job to be done, “(...) because it is something we do with other people, it also goes beyond our “work,” or, at least, our “work” cannot be accomplished unless we place it in broader context of human relationships.” As Portelli, I feel that all my interviewees over the years impacted me as an individual and influenced my way of thinking about life, history, the world, and other people (Portelli, 2013:284).

promise–the researcher’s answer– yes, you may speak out now, you’ve got the right to be heard. In this context anonymization would be taking this right back from them.

The promise that *oral history* makes is also manifested in keeping such a testimony for future generations. Recording someone’s life story is not meant to serve only short-term research purposes, but it can be a kind of historical source open to other researchers if the subject wishes so.⁵⁷ This is why the consent of the narrator to archive the interview is so important for storing it on the basis of certain conditions, and re-using it, also based on the will of the narrator. In this bureaucratic procedure a kind of *shared authority* can be observed, that is, handing the decision about (the power over) his/her own story and its further use over to the narrator. Therefore, in signing such a document I do not see an attempt to limit the participant and to demonstrate the researcher’s power, but the basic right of the narrator and the possibility to share responsibility for the final outcome.⁵⁸ I am also not afraid (although my attitude has gradually been changing during current research) that my request to sign this document may destroy the trust towards me and thus affect

⁵⁷ In this sense perhaps, portrait cases could be considered the so-called “timeless” material. The question is how much the carriers of these biographies are aware of such use of them in the research.

⁵⁸ Nevertheless, I think, in agreement with Kaja Kaźmierska (2018:401), that ultimately it is the researcher who is obliged to take ethical responsibility for the final product, and above all for those who provided him with the knowledge. However, it seems to me, that this responsibility is of a different burden for biographical researchers using the biographical method, and different for oral historians. In my opinion, in the first case, this responsibility ends with the moment an anonymized text is created which from this time on lives its own life, in the second case it never ends.

the acquired material.⁵⁹ I experienced the opposite when I discussed the conditions of the consent with the interview partners (having read together a short description of the project). Then, I observed that on the one hand it gave them a sense of security (that they will not be misused) and the power of decision making on the other (ultimately they decide if, and to what purposes their narrative will be used). This practice proves the researcher's professionalism, confirms his/her serious attitude to work, expresses respect for the narrators and is not, as Plummer (2005) wants, a manifestation of power.⁶⁰ Applying it does not mean that ethical dilemmas disappear, on the contrary, as the awareness of potential consequences of our actions increases - the number of dilemmas increases, but I believe that eventually it makes us become better scientists. Broadening our

⁵⁹ In this context, the sociologist from Lodz talks, after Plummer (2005), about two approaches to the so-called *informed consents*. The first perspective called by the British sociologist an "absolutist" one implies an undisputed gaining of a written consent from the narrators, which only strengthens the imbalance and inequality between the two parties. The second "relativistic" approach refers to a general conviction that morality is rooted in culture and should not be subject to legislation. The text shows that the author is closer to the latter approach, she is in favor of leaving ethics to the scientists who, by nature, should act ethically. Therefore, in her opinion, a written consent is not needed for any party if the interaction is based on mutual trust and respect and on the assumption that they are present in the entire research process (Kaźmierska 2018:402-405).

⁶⁰ Here, I do not connect research professionalism with "professionalization of ethics" in the context of scientific research mentioned by Kaźmierska (2018:402-405). I totally agree with her that the introduction of top-down principles regulating ethical issues in research without taking into account the specificity of individual research approaches leads to unnecessary confusion and, as a consequence, to resistance of researchers, which in my opinion has the opposite effect. Then, it becomes a compulsion, an unwanted order, which must be executed in order to satisfy, for example, a grant giver. In my opinion, it may not only limit reflection on the ethical side of the undertaken activities and the necessity to ask ethical questions at every stage of the research process, but above all to act to the detriment of the participants of this research. I think, the way we deal with such formal requirements depends primarily on what kind of epistemological position we take.

imagination and ethical horizon is a process that continues and leads to paying more and more attention to ethical research aspects (Gałęziowski, Urbanek 2017; Sheftel, Zembrzycki 2016).

Certainly, one can always question how our interlocutors understand what a research project is and whether they are really aware of consequences that result from the use of their memories (especially personal data) in a scientific publication (Hammerley, Traianou 2012 after Kaźmierska 2018). After all, however, it is about our sensitivity, ethics, and the question if we as researchers live by it every day (namely whether we are ethical researchers). It seems to me, that the above-mentioned activities primarily aim at subjecting the narrator as a partner in a dialogue with the researcher, the co-creator of the source which is a life story, the owner of the created material and the interpreter of his/her own biography. This sharing of the researcher's power with the narrator (*shared authority*) is at the bottom of the research approach which is *oral history* and in this sense differentiates it significantly from biographical method which tries to explain processes and phenomena occurring in society by the means of individual biography.

Conclusion

Pointing out these, in my opinion, fundamental differences between the two approaches does not mean that they do not have common areas (such as the passion for attentive listening to stories about life) or space to cooperate and learn from each other. At this point, I would like to draw attention only to a few aspects regarding mutual inspiration.

In Schütze's approach I highly appreciate working with the research material, its collective, collaborative, and not individual character. Oral historians very rarely analyze interviews together (it sometimes happens during classes with students at universities). It seems to me that we lack the willingness to bend over life stories and discuss their possible interpretations. In Schütze's approach, however, we can see humbleness of the researcher, awareness of one's limitations, and "fixations" resulting from lack of distance to acquired and analyzed material or simply from its apparent knowledge coming from routine or fatigue. The German sociologist used this practice starting from the first interviews he collected together with his friend Gerhard Riemann. He also used to work in a similar way with American sociologists, including Anselm Strauss and his colleagues. The idea of biographical seminars had, by its nature, a character of democracy and equality. Here, at one table representatives of different disciplines gather, being at various levels of academic career, professors and students working together on the texts, on the one hand taking advantage of their experience and a fresh glance on the other, inspiring one another. Schütze sees in this the "Humboldtian idea" of openness and partnership of learners and educators (Każmierska 2014c:317). This idea is also supported by the assumptions of interpretative approach in social sciences, emphasizing the social construction of reality according to Berger and Luckmann, and the conviction that interpretations can be negotiated by exchanging perspectives, experience, and reference framework during a biography analysis made together (Każmierska 2014b). I myself had the opportunity to experience this twice when my interviews were being analyzed in this way during

biographical seminars in Lodz conducted since 2011 by Kaja Kaźmierska and Katarzyna Waniek propagating this idea in Poland. For me, both sessions were of great importance, as they not only enriched my research workshop by taking into account different analytical perspectives, but above all they opened many ways of interpretation ahead of me, which I would probably not enter myself because of lack of knowledge or because I just did not see them, or because there was too much intimacy with the narrators and the material itself.⁶¹ Discovery of these different interpretation options and analytical layers does not mean that they will be included in the emerging doctoral dissertation and potential future publication. Their possible use will depend on the context (for example, in a passage describing in general some common or contrasting features of this group) and will be based on the assumption taking into consideration the good of those who confided their life stories in me, which like Schütze I treat as a gift ("*they give to us the gift of their life story,*" Kaźmierska 2014:342), or as "a favor" like Portelli likes to repeat in his lectures. I think that such a collective and collaborative way of working with biographies, at least in the academic context, should be a norm and certainly oral historians would benefit a lot letting other researchers look at their interviews from their own perspective and sometimes even ask naive questions that would confront them

⁶¹ During the first meeting, which took place on October 13, 2017, three interviews with CBOW whose fathers were Germans were conducted, and a year later (November 16, 2018) three more interviews followed, but the difference was the fathers of these narrators were Soviet soldiers. The work was carried out in accordance with the rules of art, on anonymized transcriptions, taking the utmost precautions when it comes to the possibility of recognizing the identity of the interlocutors. The narrators themselves had been informed about this type of work with their biographies even before the interview and consented to it.

with what seems obvious referring to H. Garfinkel's *seen but unnoticed* (1967, after Kaźmierska 2014b).

I will not write about the possibilities of using analytical instrumentarium, because such activities are not only empowered, but desirable and they can bring a lot to the research, preserving methodological rigor in their application and references to theoretical framework in this research field. It is important because then such an analysis carried out, for example by historians, would not only stand criticism of opponents of oral sources, but also borrowing methods from other perspectives or the application of theory in general,⁶² and it will indirectly contribute to raising the level of research based not only on intuitive analysis (possibly a compilation of fragments of interviews), but established in certain research traditions with appropriate interpretation tools.⁶³

On the other hand, sociologists operating in the field of biographical research may benefit from the

⁶² This attitude is especially popular among historians who, as Ewa Domańska writes, basically have an aversion to all theories (Domańska 2012). They rarely reveal their research workshop, perhaps because of fear of criticism and the fact that then their theoretical dilettantism would come out (this is not only a feature of historians, Kaźmierska wrote about the reluctance of sociologists to show their research "kitchen" referring to Louise Corti's article (2000). At the same time, disclosure of this "kitchen" carries a lot of justified concerns (Kaźmierska 2014c:225).

⁶³ In her texts, Kaja Kaźmierska repeatedly drew attention to the stereotypical perception of the biographical method as an "easy" one, which leads to its trivialization (Kaźmierska 2010, 2012, 2014b, 2014c, 2018). Many people think that its use does not require detailed knowledge or specific skills - after all, anyone can go and record a conversation with someone about life or events, and then interpret it in their own way. I think that this diagnosis may also apply to oral history, which is currently very popular and is used in various activities and contexts. Under the banner of oral history various activities can be hidden, which can sometimes be observed at scientific conferences where *oral history* projects, which in fact have little in common with it are presented. However, asking a question if it actually is oral history is often taboo or is seen as "cavilling" at it.

achievements of theoretical reflection of oral history, its concern about the role of the researcher in acquiring the interview, and the importance of the relationship with the narrator in the research process. They can also nuance their approach to anonymization, which, as I tried to show, does not fully fulfil its role or does it partially if we consider the possibility of hurting the interlocutor.⁶⁴ Anyway, it can happen at any stage of the research process and the thought of such a possibility should be the subject of in-depth reflection, anticipating undesirable effects of our actions (although, surely not everything can be predicted), and we can inform our interview partners about some of them before we start our research.⁶⁵ Personally, I think, that it is a good practice to talk with the narrator about the project he/she participates in, create conditions to articulate all doubts, ask questions related to the entire research process and those which concern ourselves. Finally, I consider it absolutely necessary to obtain informed consents for participation in research, archiving, and the use of the acquired material. All the more, as the biographical interviews that are used today by sociologists to study social phenomena and processes, tomorrow will be an invaluable historical source, thus increasing

⁶⁴ In addition, in the era of advancing widespread access to information and social media, it is not difficult to reach the interlocutor even with a small amount of data. Kaźmierska writes about this aspect in the context of anonymization (2018).

⁶⁵ In the CBOW project, brief information about the project (*information sheet*) was presented to the participant in the form of a document with which he was to be familiarized. In such a document, among other things, the rights of the narrator (e.g., the right to refuse to answer questions or general right to withdraw from the research) and possible risks were presented. During the meeting, this document was discussed by the researcher and then the narrator was asked to sign the consent to participate in the research. After the interview, the consent for archiving and the rules for the use of the recorded content with defining any possible reservations was signed. The interviewer himself/herself decided whether and in what form the material could be archived, as well as how and when it could be used.

the stock of oral sources or oral histories, assuming that the term covers both methodology and its “product” which is the “life story” (Abrams 2016:2). Kaja Kaźmierska also points out this feature of interviews, for instance, in the context of a collection of recordings from the first large project of the sociologists of Lodz based on the biographical method from Schütze’s perspective. For this reason, they have been digitized and today they are a part of the research data gathered in the Qualitative Data Archive in Warsaw. In this sense, the influence of oral history on biographical research is visible (Kaźmierska 2014c).

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Staying in our research fields, we can inspire one another, learn from one another, and benefit from the heritage of both traditions. We can also use tools and concepts created by other researchers still being independent. My goal was not to put boundaries between disciplines or approaches, but rather to postulate for more mindfulness, theoretical and methodological self-awareness of the researchers so that referring to an interdisciplinary approach to research does not imply its poor quality.

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Historia mówiona a metoda biograficzna. Wspólne ramy i różnice wynikające z odmienności perspektyw badawczych

Abstrakt: Rozważania podjęte w tym artykule bezpośrednio wynikają z badań nad losami dzieci urodzonych z powodu wojny w Polsce (Children Born of War) i wiążą się z metodologicznym, epistemologicznym i etycznym napięciem doświadczanym w pracy z rozmówcami oraz podczas analizy ich relacji. Napotkane trudności stały się źródłem do krytycznej refleksji oraz impulsem do podjęcia próby usystematyzowania wiedzy o wzajemnych relacjach dwóch tradycji badawczych: historii mówionej i metody biograficznej, które na przestrzeni kilku dekad współistniały, wzajemnie na siebie wpływając i przenikając się do tego stopnia, że z czasem wielu badaczy zaczęło je ze sobą utożsamiać lub uważać jedną za część drugiej i na odwrót. Istotny w tym procesie był chaos dotyczący terminów i pojęć. W tekście przedstawione zostały także podobieństwa i różnice obu podejść, zarówno w wymiarze epistemologicznym, jak i etycznym. Za fundamentalną różnicę uznany został stosunek do badanego, który wynika przede wszystkim z odmiennych celów naukowych, jakie stawiają sobie badacze poruszający się w obu polach badawczych. Podkreślenie różnic nie ma jednak celu stawiania granic, ale stanowi postulat zachowania większej uważności i samoświadomości teoretycznej i metodologicznej badaczy, ma także sprzyjać wzajemnemu poznawaniu się i inspirowaniu, co może pozytywnie wpłynąć na jakość badań i analiz.

Słowa kluczowe: historia mówiona (*oral history*), metoda biograficzna, historia o życiu (*life story*), autobiograficzny wywiad narracyjny, interdyscyplinarność, dylematy etyczne