



ACTA HISTRIAE

31, 2023, 3



UDK/UDC 94(05)

ISSN 1318-0185
e-ISSN 2591-1767



Zgodovinsko društvo za južno Primorsko - Koper
Società storica del Litorale - Capodistria

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31, 2023, 3

KOPER 2023

ISSN 1318-0185
e-ISSN 2591-1767

UDK/UDC 94(05)

Letnik 31, leto 2023, številka 3

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Zgodovinsko društvo za južno Primorsko - Koper / Società storica del Litorale - Capodistria® / Institut IRRIS za raziskave, razvoj in strategije družbe, kulture in okolja / Institute IRRIS for Research, Development and Strategies of Society, Culture and Environment / Istituto IRRIS di ricerca, sviluppo e strategie della società, cultura e ambiente®

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Tisk/Stampa/Print:

Založništvo PADRE d.o.o.

Naklada/Tiratura/Copies:

300 izvodov/copie/copies

**Finančna podpora/
Supporto finanziario/
Financially supported by:**

Javna agencija za znanstvenoraziskovalno in inovacijsko dejavnost Republike Slovenije / Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency, Mestna občina Koper

**Slika na naslovnici/
Foto di copertina/
Picture on the cover:**

Ustna zgodovina / Storia orale / Oral History (Photo: Urška Lampe)

Redakcija te številke je bila zaključena 30. septembra 2023.

Revija Acta Histriae je vključena v naslednje podatkovne baze / Gli articoli pubblicati in questa rivista sono inclusi nei seguenti indici di citazione / Articles appearing in this journal are abstracted and indexed in: CLARIVATE ANALYTICS (USA): Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), Social Scisearch, Arts and Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI), Journal Citation Reports / Social Sciences Edition (USA); IBZ, Internationale Bibliographie der Zeitschriftenliteratur (GER); International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS) (UK); Referativnyi Zhurnal Viniti (RUS); European Reference Index for the Humanities and Social Sciences (ERIH PLUS); Elsevier B. V.: SCOPUS (NL); DOAJ.

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Članki, objavljeni v tej številki Acta Histriae, so nastali v okviru projekta / *Gli articoli pubblicati in questo numero di Acta Histriae sorsero nell'ambito del progetto / The articles published in this issue of Acta Histriae were arised from the project:* "Families and memories of Italian prisoners of war in Yugoslavia after World War II" (IT-POW FAMILIES). This research was supported by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement [grant number 839474].



SOME METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON ORAL HISTORY IN THE BORDERLANDS: A SLOVENE-ITALIAN CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The article proposes some methodological reflections on doing oral history in borderland areas, starting from the case study of the Slovene-Italian borderland. It elaborates on some mistakes and difficulties the author has faced when conducting interviews in the Slovene-Italian borderland. She reflects on various challenges and obstacles, from language to terminology and conflicting collective narratives. She concludes that, as in any oral history project, as well as in borderland areas, it is important to create a relaxed atmosphere that allows for an open discussion of issues of the shared past. In a space often full of conflicting narratives and memories this is not always easy, and it is probably easier for those who are several generations distant from the events. However, the key elements of such an interview are creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and honesty and especially to (patiently) listen to the narrator, without judgement.

Keywords: oral history, borderlands, collective memory, contested past, Slovene-Italian borderland

ALCUNE RIFLESSIONI METODOLOGICHE SULLA STORIA ORALE NELLE ZONE DI CONFINE: IL CASO DI STUDIO SLOVENO-ITALIANO

SINTESI

L'articolo propone alcune riflessioni metodologiche sulla storia orale nelle zone di confine, partendo dal caso di studio del confine sloveno-italiano. L'articolo analizza alcuni errori e difficoltà che l'autrice ha incontrato nel condurre interviste nella zona di confine sloveno-italiana. Riflette su varie sfide e ostacoli, dalla lingua alla terminologia e narrazioni collettive contrastanti. Conclude che, come in ogni progetto di storia orale, anche nelle zone di confine è importante creare un'atmosfera rilassata che consenta una discussione aperta sulle questioni relative al passato condiviso. In uno spazio spesso pieno di narrazioni e memorie contrastanti, questo non è sempre facile, e probabilmente lo è di più per coloro

che sono lontani diverse generazioni dagli eventi. Tuttavia, gli elementi chiave di un'intervista di questo tipo sono la creazione di un'atmosfera di rispetto reciproco, onestà e soprattutto l'ascolto (paziente) del narratore, senza giudizi.

Parole chiave: storia orale, zone di confine, memoria collettiva, passato contestato, zona di confine sloveno-italiana

INTRODUCTION

Borderland areas are regions where different languages, cultures, nationalities and communities meet, sharing and enriching this common space, but often living and experiencing it in different ways.¹ As the Slovenian historian Marta Verginella notes:

[i]f we walk through the 20th century, we find that attitudes and understandings of the border depended on one's national, ideological, social and, last but not least, gender affiliations, especially during periods when the conflict between borderland societies was most intense (Verginella, 2022a, 7).

In this paper, we will focus on the borders, both physical and mental, that characterise multicultural spaces and places where different communities and nationalities meet and live side by side, but where their lives and coexistence are conditioned by different factors. Thus, spaces and places where the community is divided between 'us' and 'them'. The case study will focus on the Slovene-Italian (borderland) area, which can be seen as a typical example of a region where different cultural and national communities have coexisted for centuries, but, at the same time, cultural and historical differences, the constant changing of (political) borders, as well as different interpretations of the past, (still) cause divisions in the community.²

1 Although the case study of the region to which this paper refers is divided (also) by a physical boundary, the boundary in this context can be understood in a much broader sense. Borderland space is therefore not only understood as the space along the (physical) border, as borders can also be mental and psychological, linguistic, ideological, political, national, cultural, etc. In all these contexts, oral history research brings very similar obstacles and difficulties.

2 It is important to emphasise that borderland regions are often places of mixed cultural identities. As Slovenian sociologists Mateja Sedmak and Maja Zadel note, in the Slovene-Italian borderland, "it is common for members of the Italian and Slovenian minorities not to identify with the major ethnic group on an individual level, and not with the ethnic group of their mother land either. Their ethnic identity is embodied by the statement *I am not Slovenian and I am not Italian, I am a minoritarian*" (Sedmak & Zadel, 2015, 162; cf. Sedmak, 2009). It is precisely the non-identification with the major ethnic group that creates differences and, above all, different interpretations of the past, which are often diametrically opposed to those of the major ethnic group (cf. Hrobat Virloget, 2021a and 2022). The collective narrative and memory of the minority is therefore constantly confronted with the collective narrative of the major ethnic group, which has an impact on everyday life in borderland areas.

The purpose of this paper is to elaborate on some of the mistakes and difficulties I have faced and continue to face when conducting interviews in the borderland.³ I aim to share some observations and solutions that may be useful for other researchers. In fact, as has been highlighted by the Italian Association of Oral History (AISO) in the Best practices for Oral History,

[...] in doing history with oral sources, the responsibilities of deontological reflection are often left entirely on the shoulders of the individual researcher, his or her personal learnings during the fieldwork and his or her personal – and often lonely – dialogue with the research experiences of the historians and historians who have preceded him or her (AISO, 2020; cf. Casellato, 2021).

This is particularly important for oral historians conducting research in borderland areas, as they have even fewer relevant methodological studies to serve as a basis for their research methodology and work. Thus, based on the mistakes or, rather, difficulties I have faced (and am still facing) and ongoing reflection, I will attempt to highlight what I as a researcher have in mind during my work and to provide some insight, from my own research experience, into the obstacles found in this borderland regions and how to deal with them, or at least to understand and try to be aware of them. I am convinced that a sound working methodology makes it easier for historians to fulfil their fundamental task – that is, to analyse and interpret the collected materials and sources thoroughly and accurately in their relation towards these regions and the historical processes that shape them. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, by working thoughtfully we can avoid deepening divisions and causing further disruption in borderland communities.

BACKGROUNDS: THE ORAL HISTORIAN AND THE PROJECT

For the purpose of this paper, the background (including the methodological background) is obviously of a very personal nature, as I, as an oral historian,⁴ am actively

- 3 During the last decades, we witness an intensive growth of interdisciplinary studies that see the Upper Adriatic region as a special research laboratory (cf. Ballinger, 2003, 2006; Cattaruzza, Moscarda & D'Ottavio, 2008; Cattunar, 2012a, 2012b, 2014; Crainz, 2005, 2008; Klabjan, 2010, 2012, 2017, 2019, 2021; Klabjan & Bajc, 2021; Orlić, 2015, 2019; Nemec, 2020; Pupo, 2012; Purini, 2010; Rožac Darovec, 2010, 2016, 2018; Ruzicic-Kessler, 2017; Širok, 2010a, 2010b, 2012a, 2012b; Verginella, 2008, 2021, 2022a, 2022b; Thomassen, 2006; Wörsdörfer, 2009). In many respects, it is precisely the borderness and the (changing) frontiers that have shaped this space (cf. Verginella, 2010). The specificities of this area in comparison to spaces and places that are much more nationally, culturally and linguistically homogeneous are by now quite clear. In this article, we therefore intend to address the hitherto under-researched problem of what obstacles this region poses to oral historians, and how to address and cope with them. Although the Italian oral historian Alessandro Cattunar, who has focused mainly on the Gorizia region, has published several works on the role and function of oral history in the Slovene-Italian borderland (2012a, 2012b, 2014), his writings do not highlight the methodology of the interview in oral history from the perspective of the borderlands.
- 4 The terms applied in this paper follow Oral History Association (OHA) principles and good practices. In this sense, the *oral historian* is the one who “[m]ore than just interviewing, [...] must keep all aspects of the oral history process in mind, including project planning and implementation” (OHA Glossary, 2023).

involved in the process of collecting oral sources. Namely, as it has been affirmed several times and as stated by Alessandro Portelli, one of the founding fathers of the methodology of oral history in Italy,

One of the things that make oral sources different is that they are the achievement of a shared labor between the narrators and the researcher who seeks them out, listens, and interrogates (Portelli, 2003, 15).

I will therefore start with the oral historian, with myself. I was born in the Slovene-Italian borderland, on the Slovenian side of the border, in Koper. I am Slovenian. The presence of another cultural and national group in this area has always been obvious to me, at least in linguistic terms, since it is a bilingual area; from the first cartoons I watched as a child on Italian TV programmes to my early learning of Italian from the first year of primary school. I have always experienced the awareness of the existence of the ‘other’ as something positive. Something that makes us, who live along the border, special, different and, above all, something that is very enriching.

This to some extent idealistic image of mine gradually began to change the moment I started doing research on topics that create conflicts into the Slovene-Italian borderland; the issue of extrajudicial executions in Venezia Giulia after the Second World War – the so-called ‘foibe’ (cf. Valdevit, 1997; Pupo & Spazzali, 2003; Pupo, 2010; Pirjevec et al., 2012; Gobetti, 2021), the deportations of Italian captives to Yugoslavia after the liberation of Trieste (cf. Troha, 2004, 2014; Bajc, 2011, 2012; Lampe, 2022), the exodus of the (mainly) Italian population from Istria to Italy after the Second World War (cf. Kosmač, 2017; Altin & Badurina, 2018), and so on. It was then that I first became aware of the social divisions and the many conflicting and contradictory narratives present in this region. When I started doing oral history and decided to put a human face to my research, to highlight the perspective of the small, and apparently insignificant, people in these processes, I started to face the first difficulties and obstacles that taking oral histories in borderland environments entails.

It is precisely in the Slovene-Italian borderland where the research on Italian prisoners of war in Yugoslavia after the Second World War is situated.⁵ The methodology of the project is based on the collection of testimonies from relatives and descendants of the prisoners in order to determine how memory

5 This work was supported by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement [grant number 839474] and research program “The Practices of Conflict Resolution between Customary and Statutory Law in the Area of Today’s Slovenia and Neighboring Countries” (P6-0435), funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency (ARIS). For the necessities of this article, I will refer especially to interviews related to the deportations of Italians after the liberation of Trieste on May 1, 1945. The testimonies of those come mostly from the region Venezia Giulia (today Friuli – Venezia Giulia), but not exclusively. However, the problem of those deportations remains one of the key disputes in the Slovenian-Italian borderland (cf. Lampe, 2022).

was transmitted across generations and what (long-term) consequences the experience of captivity left behind. This means that I, the oral historian, come from one national community (Slovenian), while most of my interlocutors and narrators come from the Italian national community. It is a predetermined fact that cannot be changed, but exists *a priori*. My hypothesis is that this is what conditions the course of the interview and raises obstacles that may not exist in other circumstances. Above all, it forces the researcher to constantly self-reflect on his work, his personality, his beliefs, his way of communication, as well as to reflect on the social constructs and different narratives that are present in this region, which are often in conflict with each other. I therefore outline below some of the obstacles, difficulties, and reflections that I have encountered during my work.

OBSTACLES, CHALLENGES, CONSIDERATIONS

Language

The first obstacle, which is obvious, is certainly of a linguistic nature. A lack of knowledge of the language of the narrator⁶ is a considerable obstacle that can hamper any interview. To be precise, not being familiar with the language of the narrator can be the result of many factors, including very broad subjects and the globalisation of oral history, when researchers conduct research in other countries or even continents, where, of course, not being familiar with the language is often to be expected (although not welcome). Unlike in these cases, however, in borderland regions, language is a clear indicator of the community from which the speaker is coming. Although it is a multicultural and multilingual space, knowledge of the other – minority – language is not to be taken for granted. This is why researchers in the Slovene-Italian borderland often raise questions about the importance of intercultural education (which, of course, goes beyond the mere knowledge of the language of the other, cf. Zudič Antonič, 2017). Thus, even though in this region several languages have (co)existed for centuries, it is not always the case that everyone comprehends and speaks the minority language. Consequently, in oral history research projects in borderland regions, there are mainly four options:

1. the interview takes place in the mother tongue of the narrator (which is the “ideal” situation);⁷

6 The narrator is a “person being interviewed during an oral history recording”. Although there are many possible terms, OHA uses exclusively this term, “as an acknowledgment that the people we interview have agency and are not merely ‘living human subjects’” (OHA Glossary, 2023).

7 We call this the “ideal situation”, since it is easier for the narrator to be able to express him/herself in his/her mother tongue, especially when it comes to his/her own memories and past.

2. the interview takes place in the mother tongue of the oral historian;
3. the interview takes place in a third language (e.g. English);
4. the interview involves a third person (an interpreter).⁸

In my case, since I am an active speaker of Italian (although it is not my mother tongue), the interviews with Italian narrators take place in the Italian language. At the same time, however, this does not mean that the respective positions of the participants are equivalent during the interview. Nevertheless, as Thompson observes,

[...] even with a more general historical study of a community or an industry, it is important to pick up a knowledge of local practices and terminology as quickly as possible. [...] Many oral historians have found that a basic knowledge for work terms is useful, as a key to establishing mutual respect and trust (Thompson, 2000, 224).

A good knowledge of the language and terminology of the problem is essential to establish an equal relationship that also reflects respect for the “other” and what he/she has to say. Of course, this can be a major obstacle in cases where the mother tongue of the interlocutors is not the same. I therefore give below some of my own observations when conducting interviews in Italian.

Weaker understanding of the delivered content

In my case, the first linguistic contact and communication between oral historian and narrator in such environments is in principle not a problem, as the sovereignty of the language of everyday communication is usually sufficient for it to proceed smoothly. However, it is much more difficult to follow the content during the interview. As oral history research has already shown, the interview itself is often very exhausting, especially if it is long. After the interview we are tired and depleted, depending on its intensity and duration. This is even more evident when the interview is conducted in a language other than the mother tongue of one of the participants. I have noticed that interviews in Italian exhaust me much more than those in Slovenian. As a result, the level of concentration can drop quickly, and the researcher has to put much more effort into maintaining the dynamics, listening and understanding what is being said. It has happened to me on several occasions that I simply did not understand certain passages due to

8 A good alternative was adopted by the Slovenian oral historian Kaja Širok and the Italian oral historian Alessandro Cattunar, who jointly conducted the interviews in the region of Gorizia.

my lack of comprehension. Listening to the recordings then brought new questions, reflections and realisations.⁹

Dialects vs. standard language

When it comes to dialects, this is a problem that is certainly not limited to the borderland, or to cases where two people are not native speakers of the same language. Dialects can certainly be a barrier, but even greater if the oral historian, as in my case, is not a native speaker of the language. During one of the interviews I conducted in Trieste, two people were present – the narrator and the mediator, who made the connection between us. I am familiar with the Triestine dialect, but not enough to fully comprehend it. Nevertheless, a large part of the interview took part in dialect (because there were two speakers of the dialect present – the narrator and the mediator). Consequently, from time to time, both interlocutors sought appropriate translations of the words in order to make it easier for me to understand what was being said. It was only when I listened to the recording afterwards that I was able to fully understand.

At the same time, and as a consequence, most of the narrators speak to me in standard Italian. And this certainly is reflected in the depth of the content. Someone expresses him/herself about their past, emotional memories and personal experiences more easily in the language that is closest to them – which is most often dialect. And, as researchers know, dialect words can also have a deeper and a multi-level meaning than the literary version of a term when it comes to interpreting content. Certainly, the depth of what is being said is lost to a certain extent in those interviews.

Familiarity with the terminology of the problem

This is why, as Thompson highlights, a very important task is to be familiar with the terminology of the problem. This of course goes beyond the linguistic framework of the analysis, but only a good and in-depth knowledge of the history of the research area can lead to a successful experience and to the acquisition of qualitative content. In this context, the oral historian must also be aware and understand the different interpretations and connotations that a term might have for the narrators, depending on their position and sensitivity towards the discussed problem, as well as on their family background and history.

In 20th century, the Slovene-Italian borderland was affected by constant border changes, wars and mutual violence which left deep wounds among

9 However, it should be emphasised that this is also the case for interviews conducted in the mother tongue of both speakers. Sometimes, it is only after listening to the recordings that certain unasked questions and unexplored topics arise.

the people on both sides of the border. As a consequence, the oral historian must be familiar with this historical background and be aware that (miss) use of certain terms ('foibe', 'exodus', 'deportations', etc.) may provoke an unwanted reaction due to the complexity of the problems. Oral historians, as any other historians of the region, must be aware that the Slovene-Italian borderland is still pervaded by conflicting and contrasting narratives, so we need to be very careful how we express ourselves and be careful if and how we address certain problems, to avoid re-opening old wounds. Thus, a researcher collecting testimonies in borderland areas must first and foremost be a good historian or an expert in the history of the area and the different narratives that often characterise it.

Related to this, a mistake I made during my first research (which also relied on oral history) served as a good lesson. It was 2010 when I was interviewing locals in Borovnica who after the Second World War lived in the surroundings of the former Borovnica camp (cf. Lampe, 2022, 53–80). As a young and underprepared researcher, at that time I was not aware of the complexity of the problem of the Borovnica camp. In addition, I had not been trained in oral history methodology before starting the interview. This resulted in the practice that on several occasions, the first topic I raised after starting the interview was the period in which the camp existed. Most of the narrators were prepared for me to address the issue and this was not a problem. However, on some occasions it caused a block among some of the narrators, who for decades were not allowed or able to talk about the camp and what had happened there (cf. Lampe, 2022, 255–265). As a result, they quickly brought the interview to an end with a little information and avoided me by saying that they did not know anything more. The wrong approach left me in front of a closed door, likely with poorer content than I could have had if I had employed a different approach.

This, of course, served as a lesson for years later, when I became aware that during the interview, the narrators should take time and be prepared to open up about potentially difficult subjects. This is necessary not only to avoid having doors closed in my face, but above all to avoid causing unnecessary harm to narrators who may not yet be ready to talk about certain (even traumatic) recollections. I shall recall here the words by the oral historian and director of the T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History, Jennifer A. Cramer, reflecting on working and conducting interviews during the Covid-19 pandemic:

When considering the mental wellbeing of participants and the aspirations of oral history work, I must reiterate that oral history is not therapy – even if the process itself can feel therapeutic to the narrator – and, in fact, if done poorly, could do harm to a respondent or an interviewer (Cramer, 2020).

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND CONFLICTING NARRATIVES

At this point, we move to what is perhaps a much more challenging obstacle, namely the presence of historical transnational tensions and conflicts and conflicting narratives in borderland contexts. In fact, borderland regions are usually areas that have been subject to constant border changes (especially in the 20th century), authorities and regimes in the past, which had an indelible impact upon them. As Kaja Širok has already observed, using the example of the Slovene-Italian borderland in Gorizia,

in mixed environments, especially in borderland areas where national identities are physically demarcated by frontiers, historical events are placed on different memory maps. In Gorizia, which in this context I understand as the area of the two towns together with the hinterland, memories of the same events from the past are formed in diametrically opposed schemes. These memories are divided twice in the area, along national (linear division) and ideological lines (vertical division) (Širok, 2012a, 17).

In borderland areas, these memory maps and especially the collective narratives, which are often guided and shaped top-down, intersect. Regardless of individual opinion, memory, position or past, in these spaces the advocacy of a specific narrative or even ideological orientation is often assigned to a particular national group *a priori*. This, of course, is the opposite of that advocated by the other group. Most of my interviews, as previously mentioned, take part among members of the Italian national community. As a Slovenian, I sometimes feel uncomfortable, because the topics that are discussed are still very sensitive and problematic in this area, precisely because of the unresolved common past. The first part of the interview is usually not difficult, as it is aimed at getting to know the problem, the basic structure of the life and family story, etc. However, in the second part of the interview, when trust is gradually gained, sensitive topics start to emerge. In this context, one of the narrators (Italian) told me how these conflicting memories and narratives affect her relationship with her Slovenian friend:

At a certain age I became interested in history myself. And trying to understand history. I have a friend of mine who is Slovenian. [...] She was born in Comeno [Komen, a town in the Carso region in Slovenia]. Comeno was burnt down [by the Germans and their Italian collaborators, during the Second World War]. Comeno was burnt and she, with her mom and her little sister, were deported I don't know where. [...] And still today, the last ones left, once a year they make a trip to the places where there were these camps and these things. And they recall all these things. She and I grew up together, from middle school to now we are always together. Yet the subject of the war, of my dad – Borovnica [camp], and her in the concentration camp, internment camp... This is experienced very differently. I always have the impression that she doesn't consider this of Borovnica ... She

considers it a logical consequence of the fascist occupation – very wrong [the occupation]. She doesn't experience it, she doesn't see it as something terrible as it was. One day we went to Ljubljana together, with husbands etcetera. And we passed by Borovnica. [...] There was a silence. And in that silence, there was everything. There was my discomfort for a place that was very hard for my father, for my family and for so many others. It was her silence for the ... Of the one who knew that for me that was hard but didn't consider it. [...] It was like a balancing of something. It was difficult for me, for her. Because sometimes we have touched these topics, but we can't be objective. One can't. Everyone has their own memories. Everyone has their own memories. And so that's how it is. That didn't break our friendship, but ... I'm sorry I can't share reasons. I understand the situation, there was nothing right about it, it wasn't right what was before either.

As we can see, conflicting memories have an undeniable impact on the relations in this space – intimate, personal, friendly, as well as on the relations between the Slovene and Italian national communities. Of course, it is difficult or impossible to expect that this will not affect the course of the interview itself and that this will not, at least at the beginning, take place in an atmosphere of scepticism. The oral historian might be perceived as advocating a particular narrative simply because he or she is a member of a particular national community.¹⁰

Historians as carriers of conflicting narratives

This raises the issue of 1) the nationality of the oral historian and 2) the identification of the historian. In the Slovene-Italian borderland, due to past narratives and the state-led and controlled historiography during socialist Yugoslavia (cf. Režek, 2014) and, finally, the current political situation,¹¹ the identification of historians is almost expected. Most frequently,¹² according to an often very superficial assessment, studies by Italian historians are prescribed to support one narrative, while, on the other hand, Slovene historians are prescribed to defend and justify the opposite narrative. The idea of a “shared history” of the

10 Although, as should be emphasised, this is most often not the case.

11 Especially after Italy in 2004 introduced the National Memorial Day of the Exiles and Foibe, celebrated on 10 February every year, which in the borderland area often takes place in a very tense atmosphere of mutual accusations over who started and who caused greater injustice to whom.

12 Although, we must emphasise, not always.

area died almost as soon as it was created.¹³ In addition, the attempts of joint studies are often ignored on the grounds that they do not support the dominant narrative (one or the other).

As a consequence, oral historians have to constantly face the implications of this situation when conducting interviews. Thus, during one of the interviews in Trieste, the narrator asked me, quite unexpectedly, what I thought of a certain historian – a member of the Slovenian minority in Italy, and therefore supposedly a defender of one narrative. The desire to “dilute” historians is omnipresent in the borderland space and in the space of conflicting narratives. Which side are you on? Which narrative are you defending? As historians, we feel that we urgently need to define ourselves. This can, of course, bring a certain disruption into the interview, as the oral historian feels challenged.

“Forbidden” topics

In this context, it seems better not to raise certain topics, unless it is necessary. For example, the term ‘foibe’ seems to be almost forbidden during the interview. On the one hand, I myself do not want to raise these issues out of fear that I will have to subsequently clarify my own standpoint or that I will break the trust. For similar reasons, the narrators are probably also cautious, because they do not know what my reaction will be. It is a clash of two worlds, which are (seemingly) advocating two different narratives. Regardless of one’s opinion or attitude towards these issues. And this is a major obstacle when conducting interviews – especially when the central topic of the interview is precisely the subject of the conflicting narrative.

Equally sensitive is the question of the fascist past of the narrator’s family. During the interview, I do not ask direct sensitive questions, e.g. about political beliefs and background. Nevertheless, often the fascist past or beliefs of the family or a relative are one of the core details of the narrative. Thus, we gradually circle around the topic until one of us is finally encouraged to raise the subject. Certainly, bringing up a relative’s fascist past can often be a subject of discomfort among narrators, regardless of who is on the other side of the recorder. However, familiarity with the history of the region reveals that it was Slovenes and Croats who were the most numerous (in)direct victims of fascism, which in the border region took on a different, distinctly nationalist and anti-Slavic connotation (i.e. borderland fascism, cf. Vinci, 2011; Žitko, 2016).

13 In this context, it is worth highlighting the attempt of a shared history of the area through the work of the Slovene-Italian Cultural and Historical Commission, which has reached a joint report, entitled *Report of the Slovenian-Italian Historical and Cultural Commission* (Poročilo slovensko-italijanske komisije, 2023). However, despite promises, the report has not reached a wider public (cf. Kacin Wohinz, 2005).

During my research, I met a family whose father, a former prisoner of war in Yugoslavia, was a convinced fascist. Initially, I did not know this, although (as I later realised when I was listening to the tape again) they tried to explain it to me in between the lines. I interviewed the son and daughter, who only gradually and carefully mentioned this information. The first time this was brought up, it was a bit awkward, but it seemed to be information that should not be hidden because, after all, it was an important element of their father's story and life. When they understood that I was not being judgmental about this belief, but that I was trying to understand it in a certain context, or that I wanted to hear about it as well, they had no trouble discussing it. And many recollections came to the surface, also and above all related to the fact that the father was a fascist and remained a convinced fascist until his death.

Silence

Silence is probably one of the most fragile elements of any interview and certainly deserves much more space than we shall dedicate to it here. At the same time, it is necessary to highlight it, since there is probably a great deal left unsaid during the interviews, particularly in borderland and spaces of conflicting memories (cf. Hrobat Virloget, 2021b). Oral historians tend to believe that narrators have openly revealed their life story, their past, their thoughts, feelings, emotions and sensations. But we should be conscious that this is not necessarily the case. Consequently, we also need to ask ourselves questions about whether something might have been left out during the interview and what this tells us – not only about the narrator and his/her narrative, but also and above all about the relationship we have built (with the narrator) and the collective and conflicting narratives that influence the course of the interview. I became conscious of this when I exchanged a few more words with the narrator after the above mentioned interview in Trieste. When the interview was over, the lady and I left the apartment of the mediator together, each heading towards her car or home. When we got to the point of parting, the lady told me that her husband was an “esule”, i.e. a member of the Italian minority who emigrated from Yugoslavia (mainly from Istria) to Trieste or Italy at the end of the war. At no point during the interview did the information come out. The husband was only mentioned when it was said that, due to his health, the interview could not take place at the interviewee's home. I did not ask any questions at that moment, due to the sensitiveness of the issue and the non-verbal communication between the narrator and the mediator. Therefore, on the street in front of the apartment, she disclosed this information, adding that now I could probably understand why the interview could not take place at her home. With a few words of superficiality about the, of course, quite understandable reasons why it would have been unwise for our conversation to take place in her home, we then parted.

Afterwards, I began to reflect on why the information did not emerge during the interview. I wondered if the interviewee, because of all this background, was at all able to openly communicate her past, her family story, her life? Was it possible that she had come to the interview already burdened by this past – knowing that I was Slovenian? I began to wonder if this interview would have taken the same course if, for example, an Italian historian had come to the interview – would she have been told the story in the same way? Would her husband's past have been omitted in the same way? Even though every interview is unique and unrepeatable, and depends on many factors, I started to wonder how nationality in borderlands and conflicting narratives can affect the way it is conducted, the things that are silenced, the trust. Similar, therefore, to Portelli and Thompson's considerations about racial differences:

Race can provide another kind of barrier: surmountable, but complex. Portelli recounts how a black Kentucky minister's wife at one point, after talking to him for hours in depth about her life, told him, 'there's always gonna be a line' between them, because, as a white person, 'I don't trust you' (Thompson, 2000, 242).

TRUST

This brings us to the crucial point of any interview and indeed of any oral history project – trust. The question of how to build a trusting relationship in a space of conflicting memories. A relationship that allows for transcending boundaries and enabling unencumbered storytelling and unencumbered listening. After the episode with the black Kentucky minister's wife, Portelli reflected as follows:

The mutual effort to speak across those lines taught me to think of the interview as an experiment in equality, where trust is achieved not by pretending that we are all the same but by laying the difference and the inequality on the table and making it, as Mrs. Cowans taught me, the implicit subject of the conversation (Portelli, 2011, 8).

Over the course of the interviews I have conducted, I have gradually come to realise that mutual trust is not built by pretending that the positions of the narrator and the listener are the same. As I said at the beginning, our positions are *a priori* different because we are members of two contrasting communities, separated by the mental boundaries of the different worlds in which we were raised and grew up. Separated by different ideas about the past, which have been instilled through the prism of collective memories and narratives that are mutually contradictory.

It is the common ground that makes communication possible, but it is the difference that makes it meaningful. And the common ground does not necessarily have to consist of a common identity (of class, of gender, of ideology...) but can be delimited, indeed must, primarily by the willingness to listen to each other, to mutual acceptance (critical insofar as it is grounded in difference). In other words: it is the historian's willingness to listen that dialogically establishes the narrator's possibility to speak. And, of course, it is the narrator's willingness to speak that enables the historian to do his or her work (Portelli, 2010).

I have learned from my experience that the only way to build trust is to patiently listen without any burden and not to let the narrator think, by any word or gesture, that his thinking or recollection is wrong or that we disagree with him/her. When, during a discussion at a conference on *Learning from Mistakes* (Imparare dagli errori/Učenje iz napak, 2022), I was asked whether it was possible to listen unencumbered in an environment burdened by a difficult and conflicted past, I expressed my conviction that it was possible. But, of course, this requires a great deal of self-reflection. I have no problem to admit that it took me several years of study of the history and past of this region, as well as collective and cultural memories and their function in society, to be able to at least partially leave behind the patterns in which I was raised. In patterns where listening about fascism is not even an option. Where trying to hear and understand or at least acknowledge the different version of facts, is not even an option. It took me many years from not wanting to hear those stories (because *we won't listen to fascists*, they are on the wrong side of history), towards being comfortable with the idea and, finally, being able and open to listen. These, in addition to being aware of my role, as an oral historian, and what the main aim of the project and the interview is – that is, to understand a world, an era, a family story and atmosphere, in which we as the researcher do not take part, resulted in me as an oral historian of the borderland regions, being able to listen. As I expressed during the conference, sometimes during an interview I feel like a ghost floating in the air, observing what is going on and trying to understand a world that is completely alien to me.

Generational distance

In this context, we should inevitably wonder about the generational distance that may indeed be necessary in order to observe the past without prejudice. In my conversations with older people in my community, I have repeatedly come to the conclusion that it is inconceivable for them to talk about the fascist period in anything other than a condemning vein. The majority of them were brought up with ideological premises that condemned the other community for past crimes, whether fascist or communist. Moreover, most of them have experienced first-hand the consequences of growing up during a sensitive period of defining new national

borders, which only came to an official end with the 1975 Treaties of Osimo. In the period before 1991, when Slovenia declared its independence, it was impossible to openly discuss the past, as it was still burdening generations of people who had been brought up by someone who had felt the direct consequences of the ideological struggle that had taken place in that space. Therefore, it is probably easier to conduct interviews for someone who belongs to a generation that is no longer directly influenced by the past narratives. In fact, it is probably easier for both – the oral historian and the narrator. Especially if the oral historian lets the narrator know that he seeks to understand the past without being judgmental.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper raises several issues that have emerged during my research so far. Surely another oral historian in the borderland area would have identified some other problem and obstacles that I may not have or may have (even unconsciously) avoided. Nevertheless, in conclusion, I would like to highlight some key things that I have learned from these mistakes and try to keep in mind during my research.

Language

A very good and active knowledge of the narrator's language is important in order for the narrator to be able to tell the story in a relaxed and composed way, without fear of being misunderstood. Of course, it is quite clear that there are many situations where this is not possible, which does not mean that the interview will not be good, qualitative and successful. Many other factors naturally influence its conduct and success. However, apprehending the native language of the narrator certainly means that the researcher has avoided an important obstacle, especially in a space where language and bilingualism or multilingualism are not taken for granted; in a space of multiple conflicts and repression, where the use of one or the other language in everyday life and in public was not always taken for granted or was even, in certain periods, undesirable or forbidden. Knowing the language of the other can also be an important gesture as a sign of overcoming the national frames and collective narratives that complicate the conduct of an interview.

Unprepared and without expectations

Experience has shown me that the best way to prepare for a first interview is to be unprepared and to have no expectations. My first contact with a family story and narrative is preferably the first time I hear the story at all. Even when I interview several different family members, each time I ask the individual to recount their story as if I am hearing it for the first time. And often the result is very surprising. Namely, as Portelli notes:

The historian's agenda is intersected with the narrators' agenda: what the historian wishes to know may not entirely coincide with what the people being interviewed wish to tell (Portelli, 2010).

That is why I have learned to have no expectations before an interview and to let myself be surprised by what the narrator has and wants to say.

Mutual respect, honesty and integrity

During the interview, I try to create a relaxed atmosphere in which I try to make the narrators feel comfortable and aware that I am not judging them, their choices and beliefs, just as I am not judging the beliefs and choices that relatives have made during their life. It is important to respect the fact that for the narrators, this is their personal and family story, their memories and reflections on the past, and that the narratives feature people who are important to them, regardless of their past choices and beliefs.

This is not always easy in spaces of conflicting and contradictory memories, when the interview is the joint effort of members of different or even opposing communities. However, I believe that before the interview, the researcher must clear up and liberate himself from this past and from the narratives in which he has been brought up or has grown up. He or she has to be open-minded in accepting a different view of the common past of the area. Interviewing in conflict environments about conflicting narratives should always be conducted in a spirit of mutual respect. As researchers, we need to respect and value all that is given to us during the interview. Regardless of one's own opinions and beliefs, this has no place in a research setting. Even if conflict situations arise during the interview itself, the researcher's response must be respectful, reassuring, and sympathetic. We need to understand that this is their story and their interpretation. This certainly requires a lot of self-reflection, but the researcher must follow the interest of the research and not his own convictions. The interest of the research is always to gather the multi-coloured palette of different memories, narratives and accounts that have shaped and still shape the everyday life of the borderland regions.

Listening

One of the first and most invaluable lessons of oral history, transmitted to me by my mentor Alessandro Casellato, was that the most important thing for a good oral historian is to be able to listen and to hear. Although there are several different ways of conducting interviews and listening (cf. Slim et al., 2003), the art of listening (*arte dell'ascolto*, cf. Portelli, 2010) is certainly one of the main strengths of a researcher. This is certainly even more important in spaces of conflicting memories and narratives, where communities and people are accustomed to accusing each other first and foremost, and much less to listening to each other. It happened to me several times that the interview was the first opportunity the narrators had to tell their story and be heard.

Thus, I have learnt to come to the first interview unprepared, with no expectations and no questions. The (first) interview is mainly about listening to the narrator's story and what he/she wants to tell me and what he/she wants to share with me. I write down any questions I may have during the interview and only ask them at the end of the interview, when the narrator thinks he has nothing more to say.

I am convinced that patiently listening serves multiple functions, and ultimately because it is a way of letting the narrators know that we are interested in their story, in their life, in their feelings, in their memories, in their experiences. That we are interested in them as a person and not just in what they have to tell us, which is useful for research. This is also a way of building a relaxed atmosphere, which ultimately allows us to raise even controversial topics.

My research experience so far has shown that by considering and understanding these issues, I can produce much better and deeper content. But, ultimately, it is much more important, from an ethical point of view, to build a respectful and open relationship with my narrators, and not to cause more damage to relationships in a space already fraught with tension and conflict, by perhaps taking the wrong approach. In doing so, I have also observed that the narrators value my approach and are often very relieved to be able to talk openly about their past. Recently, I received a very touching message from one of the narrators.

It was a wonderful and unexpected meeting for me as well, especially because more than an interview, I had the opportunity to meet with an intelligent and sensitive person with whom I could recall my Father's life, his being, his choices, the tragic period of the war up to his imprisonment, which undoubtedly marked him, but also forged him stronger than before, knowing how to look forward with new enthusiasm. It is not easy to talk about certain events, for many years it was uncomfortable just to remember, but what I experienced next to my father will remain indelible and remembering it as I was able to do with you, was quite strong and we shared the same emotions.

For them, an interview is often one of the rare occasions in their lives when they can talk and reflect about their past, their family story and their history. That is why it is important to listen first and foremost and to give them the opportunity to recall this past openly. One of the greatest virtues of an oral historian is patience – as opposed to impatience. In an (instant) world, where everyone is accustomed to getting quick results and answers, do not assault the narrator with questions in order to get the answers quickly. The narrator needs to have control over what he/she has and wants to recount. We should listen patiently to their stories, and we will be surprised to find that within those stories, we will get most of the answers. But we will get them in the moment when the narrator is ready to tell us these stories and give us the needed answers.

NEKAJ METODOLOŠKIH PREMISLEKOV O USTNI ZGODOVINI NA OBMEJNIH OBMOČJIH: SLOVENSKO-ITALIJANSKA ŠTUDIJA PRIMERA

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POVZETEK

Članek prinaša nekaj metodoloških premislekov o ustni zgodovini na obmejnih območjih na primeru slovensko-italijanskega obmejnega območja. Podrobneje so predstavljene nekatere napake in težave, s katerimi se avtorica srečuje pri opravljanju intervjujev na slovensko-italijanskem obmejnem območju. Pri tem se osredotoča tako na jezikovne ovire in težave, ki se lahko pojavijo kot posledica tega, da sta v obmejnem prostoru raziskovalec in narator rojena govorca različnih jezikov. Posebej se posveča tudi težavam, ki jih za ustno zgodovino predstavlja skupna preteklost v prostoru, ki je pogosto prežet s konfliktnimi in nasprotujočimi si kolektivnimi naracijami. Pri tem ugotavlja, da je, tako kot pri vsakem projektu ustne zgodovine, tudi na obmejnih območjih pomembno ustvariti sproščeno vzdušje, ki omogoča odprt pogovor o vprašanih skupne preteklosti. V prostoru, ki je pogosto poln nasprotujočih si naracij in spominov, to ni vedno lahko. Bržkone je to lažje za raziskovalce, ki so od dogodkov oddaljeni več generacij. Intervju je pogosto ena od redkih priložnosti v življenju naratorjev, ko lahko govorijo in razmišljajo o svoji preteklosti, družinski zgodbi in zgodovini, kar moramo spoštovati in ceniti. Po izkušnji avtorice pa so ključni elementi intervjuvanja in projektov ustne zgodovine v obmejnem prostoru dobro in aktivno poznavanje jezika naratorja (ko je to le možno), vzpostavitev vzdušja medsebojnega spoštovanja in iskrenosti ter predvsem (potrpežljivo) poslušanje sogovornika brez obsojanja.

Ključne besede: ustna zgodovina, obmejna območja, kolektivni spomin, nasprotujoča si preteklost, slovensko-italijansko obmejno območje

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