Miroslav Vaněk
Around the Globe
Rethinking
Oral History
with Its
Protagonists

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Miroslav Vaněk

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This publication was created as part of the following project: Czech Society during the "Normalization" and Transformation Period: Biographical Narratives (GA CZ Reg. No. P410/11/1352).

Edited by Petra Bílková and Martina Pranić Layout by Zdeněk Ziegler Typeset by DTP Karolinum First edition in English

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Text © Miroslav Vaněk, 2013
Translation of preface and afterword © Daniel Morgan, 2013
Photography © Miroslav Vaněk, Alessandro Portelli (p. 122), 2013

ISBN 978-80-246-2226-2 ISBN 978-80-246-2374-0 (online: pdf)



Charles University in Prague Karolinum Press 2013

http://www.cupress.cuni.cz

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all those narrators and oral historians, who found the time to be interviewed during hectic international conferences and at other times and thus helped to create this book. I would also like to thank all my colleagues at the Oral History Center of the Academy of Science of the Czech Republic's Institute of Contemporary History for their invaluable consultation, and especially Lenka Krátká for her preparation of all necessary materials and editing work on the interviews.

Miroslav Vaněk





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1/ Preface

The publication On Oral History with Its Founders and Protagonists¹ was an initial attempt to introduce to the Czech public important international figures in the field of oral history, including their personal recollections and, above all, their views reflecting upon fundamental theoretical-methodological questions in our field. The decision to publish interviews with those who stood at the starting point of oral history's modern tradition and with those currently influencing this multidisciplinary field on an international scale seemed to me in 2008 to be both inspirational and necessary. I was led to this decision by the undisputable fact that various oral historians from sundry universities and academic institutions on several continents have profoundly influenced the work of Czech oral historians, and in many ways their publications have helped them push through a new (and thus considered "dubious" in the Czech milieu) method. Oral history's path was completely blocked off during the communist regime and encountered difficulties even after 1989.² The process of recognizing oral history in the Czech Republic (as in all former Eastern Bloc countries) could be likened to the now legendary pos-

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¹⁾ Vaněk, Miroslav: O orální historii s jejími zakladateli a protagonisty (On Oral History with Its Founders and Protagonists). Prague, The Academy of Science of the Czech Republic's Institute of Contemporary History 2008.

²⁾ Vaněk, Miroslav: Orální historie ve výzkumu soudobých dějin (Oral History in the Research of Contemporary History). Prague, The Academy of Science of the Czech Republic's Institute of Contemporary History 2004. Vaněk, Miroslav – Mücke, Pavel – Pelikánová, Hana: Naslouchat hlasům paměti: Teoretické a praktické aspekty orální historie. (Listen to the Voices of Memory: Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Oral History). Prague, The Academy of Science of the Czech Republic's Institute of Contemporary History 2007. Vaněk, Miroslav – Mücke, Pavel: Třetí strana trojúhelníku. Teorie a praxe orální historie (The Triangle's Third Side. Theory and Practice in Oral History). Prague, The Faculty of Humanities of Charles University – Prague, The Academy of Science of the Czech Republic's Institute of Contemporary History 2011.

tulate by German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer concerning the three phases of accepting new discoveries and methods by the relevant field or, as the case may be, by society. Oral history too passed through an initial phase of ridicule, a second phase of being violently opposed to, and suddenly emerged in the phase of being accepted as self-evident.

In 2012, the Karolinum publishing house offered to publish the book in English. I wavered on whether to accept this offer or not. On the one hand, I liked the idea that an English version would make the interviews accessible to a broader public. This would certainly be appreciated by my colleagues from countries that experienced circumstances similar to those of the Czech Republic (possibly even other countries as well). On the other hand, I was faced with the task of once again asking the narrators to edit and authorize the English text and knew that this could entail a relatively long process. Yet I was mistaken in this. For the most part my narrators (whom I now dare call my friends) reacted immediately.

Some of the narrators had already nearly forgotten about our interview and were surprised that I had "found" this kind of text. Others, in authorizing the interview, pointed out the increasingly complex issue that oral history embodies, whether we are speaking of questions of a theoretical-methodological, interpretational or ethical nature. It was for these reasons, as well as others that I will mention later, that I decided to take advantage of this renewed communication with my colleagues to broaden the original interviews so that they included responses (this time, however, only in the form of email correspondence) to current questions regarding oral history that I had not considered to be overly important six years ago. In my view, this attests to one thing: oral history is in the Czech milieu (though obviously elsewhere too) a dynamically evolving field/method of research.

The focus of this study and the aim of these published interviews is certainly not an attempt to create a partial "history of oral his-

³⁾ On the other hand, the English version of the publication does not contain parts of the interviews that were edited out for thematic reasons but released on DVD along with the Czech version.

tory", nor is it an attempt to answer basic theoretical questions that we are presently posing and will only receive possible answers to in the future (e.g. questions regarding the influence of globalization on the development, forms and tasks of oral history or the dilemma of whether oral history should be considered a research method or a scientific field).4 Rather, the objective of this work is to show how internationally prominent researchers, whose work has contributed significantly to the development of oral history, can differ in their views on current and future themes concerning oral history. Yet this heterogeneity of specific views and positions does not divert them from their common goal, which is to develop oral history in historiography and the other social sciences. At the same time, I would like to convey to all my colleagues and, above all, to those studying the humanities an authentic view of the founders and pioneers of oral history. In this spirit, I also hope to inspire them to reflect upon the perspectives and paths that they themselves would like to take if they opt to pursue oral history research.

Just ten years ago I would have considered the chance for me to ask questions to the founders and main protagonists in the field, the very people whom I had known up to that point only through their texts, as more of a fairytale. I still recall the thrill from the first articles and publications written by leading figures in oral history as I literally devoured their ideas on issues in contemporary oral history, its possible crossroads and pitfalls, its future in a globalized world and, finally, its possible use in interdisciplinary research.

Quite a few years have elapsed since that, I dare say fateful (at least for me), meeting when I decided to conduct the interviews (the interviews were conducted in 2007–2008). During that time, several

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⁴⁾ Many more qualified individuals have already addressed the history of oral history. See, for instance: Ritchie, Donald A.: *Doing Oral History. A Practical Guide.* Oxford, Oxford University Press 2003; Sharpless, Rebecca: The History of Oral History. In: Charlton, Thomas Lee – Myers, Lois E. – Sharpless, Rebecca M. (eds.): *Handbook of Oral History.* Lanham – New York – Toronto – Oxford, Altamira Press 2006, pp. 19–42; Vansina, Jan: *Oral Tradition as History.* University of Wisconsin Press 1985; Grele, Ronald J. (ed.): *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History.* Praeger Publishers 1991; Thompson, Paul: *The Voice of the Past: Oral History.* Oxford, Oxford University Press 1978.

important events have occurred in Czech oral history as well as in my professional life. If I were to attempt to name the most significant of these, the list would be headed by the major breakthrough that occurred on my trip to the 14th Conference of the International Oral History Association (IOHA) held in Sydney in 2006. Just five months after the Australian conference and the enriching discussions I took part in with Robert Perks, Alistair Thomson and Donald Ritchie in Sydney, we founded the Czech Oral History Association (The Oral History Center of the Institute of Contemporary History had already existed since 2000) as a platform to associate oral historians from all over the Czech Republic. Oral history was gradually established at universities, in museums and in a wide variety of archives, as well as by amateurs using the method to document family stories or the history of local organizations.

Even though I was the only Czech and probably the only representative of the former Eastern Bloc in Sydney in 2006, a highly visible (even from an international perspective) 14-member group of Czech oral historians set out for the 15th IOHA conference held in 2008 in Guadalajara, Mexico. Things developed even more rapidly from there, as it was in Mexico that the decision was made to hold the next IOHA conference in Prague (!). The Prague conference then welcomed what may have been the largest turnout in the history of our meetings with oral historians from literally all continents attending (434 papers were accepted⁶). In Prague I could personally, at least in symbolic gratitude, dedicate the Czech version of the book

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⁵⁾ Perhaps the greatest impetus for the development of oral history in the Czech Republic came from, in addition to foreign publications, these international conferences. I consider my participation in the conferences organized – both the Oral History Association (Durham 2000, Providence 2005, Oakland 2007, Denver 2011) and the International Oral History Association (in addition to the aforementioned conferences in Sydney 2006, Guadalajara 2008, Prague 2010 and Buenos Aires 2012) – to be important meetings for me with the international oral history community. Of equal importance in my view were the oral history panel discussions that I had the opportunity to attend as part of the European Social Science History Conference in Berlin (2002), Amsterdam (2006), Lisbon (2008), Ghent (2010) and Glasgow (2012).

6) For the sake of comparison, the following gives the number of papers received at the various conferences: 1996, Gothenburg 164; 1998, Rio de Janeiro 179; 2000, Istanbul 21; 2002, Pietermaritzburg (South Africa) 154; 2002, Rome 302; 2006, Sydney 203; 2008, Guadalajara (Mexico) 361; 2010, Prague 434; 2012, Buenos Aires 250 estimated.

On Oral History with Its Founders and Protagonists to all those colleagues who had provided me with an interview. To ensure that things were sufficiently symbolic, I presented the book to them from my position as the newly elected president of the IOHA (I still feel it was rather audacious of me to accept such a responsible position).

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2/ The reason for a book of interviews

"I believe, and I have said and written many times, that identity doesn't exist without continuity: However, we can only talk about identity in the case of people who know today what they were doing in the past, who guarantee and have responsibility here also for the things they did elsewhere. That is the reason it is so important to understand and study history, that is why oral history is also very important. I learned from my own experience that if I was to force myself—and if I actually did it—to write memoirs or reflections of what I lived through, it would surely be poor and not very precise in comparison with what it would be possible to pick out of me through oral history: If questions are asked by well-informed and devoted people, cognizant of the context and of all the details, it can happen that the object of their attention starts to recall things they wouldn't otherwise have remembered or would never have even imagined to be writing about before." Václay Hayel. 2008?

RESEARCHERS IN THE ROLE OF NARRATORS

The idea to appeal to my colleagues and prominent figures in the field came about by chance — I would now call it a stroke of luck.⁸

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⁷⁾ Archive of the Oral History Center of the Institute of Contemporary History. Interviews collection. A video of the greeting of former dissident, playwrite and president of the Czech Republic Václav Havel presented at the 16th IOHA conference in Guadalajara, Mexico to support the organization of the 17th IOHA conference in Prague for 2010.

⁸⁾ It was the pioneers of oral history, those who today are forging the main direction of research, who, above all, occupied the epicentre of my interest in interviews. Interviews with several presidents of the OHA and IOHA were recorded. Among the thirteen people interviewed were experts from seven countries: Australia, England, the USA, Canada, Bulgaria, Germany and Italy. All interviews are in video form with transcriptions stored at the Oral History Center of the Academy of Science of the Czech Republic's Institute of Contemporary History, Vlašská 9, Prague 1. See www.coh.usd.cas.cz.

During my month-long stay in the USA in 2007, I planned on recording both the talks given at the 41st Oral History Association (OHA) Conference in Oakland, California and several interviews in nearby San Francisco with musicians from the "hippies" period (for my project on the influence of Anglo-American rock music on Czech society). I was therefore equipped with audiovisual recording technology. It took two long sleepless nights of contemplation for the idea of a kind of "second" study to take root in my mind: Why not try approaching the "big fish" of the oral history world and ask to interview them, since I was already prepared to interview Carlos Santana, Peter Albin and Barry Melton?

Another stroke of luck was that the first oral historian I approached with this project was the extremely accommodating David King Dunaway. Not only did he willingly speak of his experiences, but he helped me in the role of "gatekeeper" to contact other pioneers in the field: Ronald Grele and Charles Morrissey. Approaching colleagues I had met in Sydney in 2006 was then no problem. These individuals included Rina Benmayor, Donald Ritchie and Robert Perks. I had originally intended to use the recorded interviews as the basis for an article in a professional periodical, but gradually began to develop a plan to record interviews with other prominent oral historians. The 7th European Social Science History Conference (ESSHC) held in Lisbon in 2008 provided me with the chance to conduct these interviews. Coincidentally, Elizabeth Millwood from the Southern Oral History Program visited Prague in 2007, and so the project included a representative of one of the largest and oldest oral history research centres in the USA.

It was somewhat more complicated, organizationally speaking, to meet with Paul Thompson, a highly revered figure in the field. Following two months of mutual email and telephone communication, Thompson's book *Voice of the Past* that I was holding served as a recognition signal when I waited for this legend in oral history in a London suburb in front of the Genesis cinema. The interview with Paul Thompson led me to the idea to approach another protagonist in the field, the Italian scholar Alessandro Portelli. My learned col-