

METHODS AND POLITICS OF THE PRESENTATION OF MEMORY IN  
CENTRAL AND SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE - THE WOMEN`S MEMORY  
PROJECT

By  
Tatjana Tepavcevic

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Supervisor Professor Marsha Siefert  
Second Reader: Professor Jasmina Lukic

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## **ABSTRACT**

Assessing published oral history interviews from an academic point of view entails many questions in terms of ethics, audience, methodology, and theory. Additionally, the history and memory debate is necessary to address along with the question of how funding of such projects is allocated.

Taking the example of the oral history International Women's Memory Project in Central and Southeastern Europe, I am examining how this project, carried out with a feminist approach to oral history, is speaking to the relationship between history and memory. How does the particular application of the method reflect on the interview as a text and what are the choices in publishing interviewees' representations of the past? What kind of possible consequences on the body of knowledge and the audience do these choices epitomize? I draw to a close by acknowledging the advantages of the oral history method and evaluating the forms in which oral history is published. I also raise questions concerning the allocation of the funding for such a project and I conclude that the highest research standards and training shows in the quality of the finished research.

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## INTRODUCTION

“History is something that we do to the collective memories of the civilization, just as memoirs and autobiography are something we do to our memories. The historian processes the past and attempts to definitely master its dangerous forces. Such acts of making memory into history are interesting themselves [...] the past shows its true dominion when it breaks into the present, at precisely those moments before we can control it with the fixed ceremonies that constitute a ‘history’.”<sup>1</sup>

When people hear about oral history, they usually visualize a dictaphone, an interviewer and an old person talking about her life. However, if we get a bit deeper in the circles of academia and graduate courses where oral history has been studied, we will see that things are not so simple. A web of methodological and theoretical concerns is being interwoven around the debate on oral history, memory and its relations with traditional history. It is known that oral history projects have witnessed their boom in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that many large-scale oral history projects have been initiated since then. This is particularly true for the area of Eastern and Central Europe after the fall of communism. It seems as if most of the things that have been silenced during the communist period needed to be documented, unveiled and everything that has been hidden needed to be uncovered. The accounts of the survivors from different concentration camps, as well as societies in transition from totalitarian regimes to democracy came to focus. Moreover, feminists saw that the time has come to re-examine our own, women’s past and identity under state socialism which was now a closed period, however, according to our own rules and paradigms.

In this context of oral history and memory studies, I will explore the case of the international oral history project “Women’s Memory” initiated in Prague in 1996. My intention is to look into the answers that an international oral history project brings to this

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<sup>1</sup> S. Owen, *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* (Harvard University Press, 1986) p. 23.

debate on the relationship between history and memory in its practice and with its outcomes. Furthermore, I will examine how several national teams that are participating in the project, address its mission through the choices in the representation (publishing) of remembering (memories of the interviewed women) and its potential audience. This study will limit itself to the example of the Czech, Croatian, Serbian, Montenegrin and Vojvodinian teams (which continued its work independently).

In order to do this I will give an extensive overview of the theoretical and methodological frameworks of memory, raising questions regarding the memory and history debate and the emergence of memory as a discursive frame for understanding the socialist and post-socialist past. I will focus on the method of oral history and I will particularly delineate the features of the feminist approach to this method.

The second chapter constitutes my empirical research in which I present interpretations of the interviews I have conducted with coordinators of the project. This chapter will serve as a portfolio of the project with its aims, methods and different adaptations of international project's original methodology. This will be carried out with the aim to see if the methodological debate might have had an impact on the outcomes of the interviews that were subsequently published. After defining what the end product of an oral history interview is, I will proceed to chapter three where the overview of the results, personal reflections of the coordinators and the reactions to the project will be given.

Finally, I will assess several available publications of the project aiming to trace different methodology and different choices in presenting these life narratives to see how these choices possibly mirror what the memory and history relationship is or can be. Furthermore, by looking at the actual publications and the publishing choices that have been made within the project, I will reflect upon the body of knowledge created through the oral history method, in terms of its use as a historical source.

## CHAPTER I: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

### 1.1. HISTORY AND MEMORY – SYNONYMS, ANTONYMS OR COMPLEMENTARY RESEARCH TOOLS?

How can we jump over our shadows when we no longer have one? How can we pass out of the century [...] if we do not make up our minds to put an end to it, engaged as we are in an indefinite work of mourning for all the incidents, ideologies and violence which have marked it? The remorse that has been expressed and the commemorations [...] give the impression that we are trying to run the events of the century back through the filter of memory [...] in order to whitewash them, to launder them. Laundering is the prime activity of this *fin de siècle* - the laundering of a dirty history, of dirty money, of corrupt consciousnesses, of the polluted planet - the cleansing of memory [...]<sup>2</sup>

In order to approach the field of oral history which is a subject of inquiry of this thesis with its different aspects and implications, it is indispensable to map out a broader context of a rather new and interdisciplinary scholarly field of memory studies. What needs to be regarded is the time frame we are approaching from, the time that is behind us and the time that is to come. Equally important is how these interact and influence each other by the knowledge they produce and give life to. For “remembrance is the drawing together of the past in the present for the purposes of evaluation and making choices.”<sup>3</sup>

According to postmodern scholars we should be skeptical about absolute values, truth claims and universalizing explanations. The rationalist and positivist roots in Enlightenment were replaced by non-hierarchic structures, Barthes’s “death of the author” and the problematizing of representation and interpretation. In history, this was interpreted as “the linguistic turn,” history seen not as a fixed reality, but as text, unstable and subject to an

<sup>2</sup> J. Baudrillard, “Paroxysm: The End of the Millennium or the Countdown” in *Economy and Society* 26/4. November 1997, pp. 447-455.

<sup>3</sup> J. Sutton, *Philosophy and Memory Traces: Descartes to Connectionism*. Cambridge University Press, 1998. Sutton contrasts historical and contemporary debates to show that psychology can be present in culture, speaking to its complexity and history.



infinite number of readings (Pocock, Skinner).<sup>4</sup> All these postmodern ideas had a great impact on historical studies; belief in objectivity and neutrality seems slightly to fade away (or is it really so?), as fluidity of personal and group identity and fluidity of memory comes into focus particularly in the flood of oral history and memory studies in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Why this came about in Eastern and Central Europe is not so hard to see, as the past century witnessed bloodshed of millions of people, so when the walls of silence were torn down (i.e. after the fall of Soviet Union) “memory as a discursive frame became available and readily usable for anybody, for millions of people, who lost their future because they lost their past, both in the East and West, and especially in Eastern and Central Europe.”<sup>5</sup> According to Klein, memory as a metahistorical category becomes crucial as the “return of the repressed in our epoch structured by trauma”[...] we will find different explanation for the recent emergence of memory as a key word, one that imagines memory as the return of the repressed: academics speak incessantly of memory because our epoch has been uniquely structured by trauma”<sup>6</sup>

In the case of the Holocaust as one of “the most productive sites of memory work,” memory appeared to answer the problems both of historical objectivity and criticisms of it (H. White).<sup>7</sup> For example, in Friedlander and La Capra’s works,<sup>8</sup> the Shoah is “the absolute event of history,” the “limit event” central to the sense of memory, that transgresses the bounds of historical discourse, and in Friedlander’s words, “the Final Solution is the most radical case of

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<sup>4</sup> Q. Skinner, “Motives, intentions and interpretation”, in idem., *Visions of Politics*, vol. I, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 90-102; J. G. A. Pocock, “Texts as Events: Reflections on the History of Political Thought”, in Kevin Sharpe, Steven N. Zwicker (eds.), *Politics of Discourse. The Literature and History of Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1987, pp 21- 34.

<sup>5</sup> Prof. I. Rev, Lecture on Memory, CEU Budapest, 30 Nov. 2009.

<sup>6</sup> K.Lee Klein: “On the emergence of memory in historical discourse” in *Representations* 69, 2000, p 128. p 138.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p 139 “Hayden White’s notorious claim that there were no good [...] grounds for emplotting an event as tragedy rather than comedy seemed especially suspect when applied to the Nazi murder of European Jews. “

<sup>8</sup> Saul Friedlander’s *Memory, History and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, 1993 and Dominick La Capra’s *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, 1998.

genocide in human history.”<sup>9</sup> Memory as a discursive frame existed already from the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>10</sup> in different disciplines,<sup>11</sup> but the scholarly boom in “memory studies” came in Central and Eastern Europe after communism suddenly collapsed. Memory has emerged as a tool with which to re-imagine and represent both individual and collective identity.”<sup>12</sup> But the questions arise within this “new memory discourse” as a part of an ongoing debate: Firstly, what is now the relationship between history and memory? Do they function as antonyms rather than synonyms; do they replace each other rather than complement each other? Furthermore, is it so, as Pierre Nora argued, that “acceleration of history confronts us with the brutal realization of the difference between “real” memory-social and unviolated, [...] and history, which is how our hopelessly forgetful societies organize the past”<sup>13</sup>; or “history and memory are not really opposites [as this] has become one

<sup>9</sup> K.Lee Klein: “On the emergence of memory in historical discourse” in *Representations* 69 (2000), p 140.

<sup>10</sup> To Prof. Istvan Rev, (see footnote 5), different historical factors, (first of all such as the outburst of hysteria in France in the 1870s), led to a new kind of memory born from the previously unrecognizable state called trauma and the previously unknown kind of forgetting called repression. Prof.Rev traced this public discourse explaining how the notion of *trauma* was first related to the physical injuries (after the railways were constructed in Britain and many accidents happened) which afterwards caused difficulties in memory and recollection; hence the doctors coined the term trauma as a symptom and explanation. Trauma was originally connected more with women because of beliefs about the instability of their body construction and sensitivity of their souls. Moreover, there was a serious alarm at the incidents of child abuse, and typical bourgeois family was strongly attacked and critiqued as the inherent secrecy of a child became a focus of psychology.

<sup>11</sup> See works of M. Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, Paris, 1925. Halbwachs was the first who argued that memory was itself a process. It was a product of social change and an always changing representation of the past because development of individual memory occurred in interaction with the larger community and the memory of social networks; Frederic C. Bartlett, *Remembering. A study in experimental and social psychology*, Cambridge, 1932. Bartlett as a psychologist demonstrated that in the process of remembering, people rely on summaries or “schemes” of the past. When a person “calls to mind” what happened, he or she will reconstruct a memory from these schemes, often adding or changing details; Abbi Warburg, the founding figure in German art history also connected the reappearance of patterns he found in art history to a theory of remembrance, which contained in its core the concept of a cultural image-memory.

<sup>12</sup> Prof. I. Rev, Lecture on Memory, CEU Budapest, 30 Nov. 2009

<sup>13</sup> P. Nora “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire.” In *Representations* 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory Spring 1989, p 8 (<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0734-6018%28198921%290%3A26%3C7%3ABMAHLL%3E2.0.CO%3B2-N>). Nora was in fact talking about sites of memory “where [cultural] memory crystallizes and secretes itself”. These include archives, museums, cathedrals, cemeteries, and memorials; What is an important point here for us is that in Nora's view, a constructed history replaces true memory. Sites of memory exist to help us recall the past – which is perhaps necessary in order to make living in the modern world meaningful (Marquard 1986).

of the clichés of our new memory discourse?”<sup>14</sup> Or perhaps it is unavoidable to go back to the writing of proper history “as it really was?”<sup>15</sup>

These are all questions that we have to be aware of, although answers are not easy to find or simple to formulate. **My intention** regarding this issue will be to look into answers that an international oral history project entitled “Woman’s Memory” brings to this debate in its practice and with its outcomes. Can the body of knowledge created through oral history stand as independent historical research without interpretation or as interpretation solely; do these representations of memory equal history or is it still necessary for them to be combined with “history proper” and put against a broader historical context? Moreover, I will aim to discern the potential degrees of this relationship regarding the subject matter of the research and the audience it is targeting.

Should we remember or should we forget and why is another difficult question raised in memory studies and oral histories. Historians tend to focus more on the social environment of memory and on how individual stories about the past act together with existing narratives and other forms of remembrance. Beyond this being a growing field of social and cultural memory studies, Timothy Snyder’s “Memory of sovereignty and sovereignty over memory” shows a direct connection between memory (collective and individual) and politics, the way memory shapes present power constellations after 1989.<sup>16</sup>

Scholars have debated about forgetting after the fall of communism, the existence of a crisis of collective memory (especially in Eastern Europe) and the possible causes of it. While some hold that the cause is post communist amnesia, and that “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” others argue that too little memory and forgetting are not

<sup>14</sup> K. Lee Klein: “On the emergence of memory in historical discourse” in *Representations* 69, 2000, p 128.

<sup>15</sup> The famous nineteenth century German historian, Leopold von Ranke, wrote, as a young man, in his first historical work, that the role of history is simply to show how it really was – “Wie es eigentlich gewesen (ist).”

<sup>16</sup> T. Snyder, “Memory of sovereignty and sovereignty over memory” in J-W. Muller, *Memory & Power in post-war Europe*, Cambridge 2005.

the issue, the issue is rather too much memory.<sup>17</sup> Claus Offe, a German political sociologist, consequently formulated an opposite maxim insinuating that tactical forgetting might be preferable: "those who remember history are condemned to repeat it."<sup>18</sup> This precisely creates a space where different stands can and must be taken in academic research. Feminist memory study in this respect takes the first stand arguing for the preservation of memory and fighting oblivion.<sup>19</sup>

It is therefore **my second aim** to examine the Women's Memory project's mission through the lens of the choices of the representation of remembering and its potential audience. The aspect of "making it public" is an important part of the project as it is constituted in one of its aims because, as the project's "symbolic" mother Jiřina řiklová stated: "[b]ased on the premise that the 'personal is political,' the aims of the project are not theoretical, but practical, [...] they should serve 'the public enlightenment,' broad public, civic society. Bringing together both these criteria – the political [...] and the academic, represents the major shape of the project."<sup>20</sup> For the sake of this thesis, it is important to note that oral history and other popular presentations of the past that surround us today (such as "people's history, "applied" history or "heritage studies") are, as Jill Liddington suggested, a part of "public history" which make an oral historian a "public historian."<sup>21</sup> Therefore, it becomes important to account for the public the project is addressing, since different

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<sup>17</sup> G. Eyal, "Identity and Trauma: Two Forms of the Will to Memory" in *History & Memory* 16.1. 2004, pp 5-36.

<sup>18</sup> One could add that these two extremes omit many nuances, especially when we know that these questions depend on individual circumstances, national or individual context and frame we are referring to. It is on one side impossible to ask people who are victims of wars and different crimes to forget, and on the other, how can we help them forgive when the anger caused by trauma calls for justice and revenge, making it impossible to move on? These questions were addressed in the abovementioned article of T. Snyder.

<sup>19</sup> The idea of sisterhood gives feminists a sense of connection with women of the past (S. Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, Oxford 1992, p126.

<sup>20</sup> J. řiklová, "Women's Memory: Searching for Identity within Socialism" published on The Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Sciences website: (<http://www.svu2000.org/women/siklova.rtf>, 2004-10-22).

<sup>21</sup> J. Liddington, "What is public History? Publics and Their Pasts, Meanings and Practices" In *Oral History*, Vol. 30, No. 1, Spring, 2002, p 84.

audiences have different needs and objectives (i.e. academics can have much more complex objects than the “average” reader).

How and to what extent do the Women’s Memory Project’s publications contextualize their findings and the implications for their choice of context is something that this thesis will address.

## **1.2. ORAL HISTORY AND WHAT MAKES FEMINIST ORAL HISTORY DIFFERENT<sup>22</sup>**

“Anyway, I told myself the story like this; then the fact of having told myself the story is no longer a simple story; it’s the life I made because I told it to myself that way. It’s also basically a slightly fetishistic idea that there ought to be something there, a social transformation, a god to encounter as something external, and that isn’t simply a story, a history: you made a life and that life depends on how you tell it to yourself. And the intensity that you put into this story or into this representation is the factor that decides whether you live a rich or a poor life, a sensitive or an insensitive life.”<sup>23</sup>

If proper history was a discourse about the past that was produced by the victors, which privileged those who had produced written sources, memory, by contrast, might be seen as the depository of knowledge of “people without history,” or traumatized communities who might remember as an “act of faith.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, oral history can, among other things, be seen as area of resistance challenging the dominant version of history.” Here, once more, we come to the question of its relationship to history which is relevant to this thesis. Is oral history a supplementary method of historical research or can the results of oral history research be presented autonomously? Can we describe this distinction as that of narratives promoted “from above” and personal memories “from below” and if we do so, what are their

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<sup>22</sup> The title is playing on the title of A. Portelli’s chapter “What Makes Oral History Different” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories*, State University of New York Press 1991.

<sup>23</sup> Romano Madera quoted in L. Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy 1968*, Hanover and London, 2005, p155.

<sup>24</sup> E. Tonkin, *Narrating our pasts- The Social Construction of Oral History*, Cambridge 1992, pp 34-36; K. Lee Klein: “On the emergence of memory in historical discourse” in *Representations* 69, 2000.

interrelations, their purpose? Can we delineate specific research topics and groups where oral history has more advantages?

In order to answer all these questions, it is important to briefly account for its beginnings and development. However, instead of giving a detailed genealogy and overview of numerous oral history projects, I will dedicate more attention to its method (with the emphasis on the researcher-respondent relationship) its relation to memory and the fields of its application. The feminist practice of oral history will then be elaborated with the reference to these issues stressing the differences in approach and theoretical premises.

To begin with, although oral history long pre-dates dictaphone and tape recorders (since its roots may be traced in oral tradition of story telling as a tradition of transmitting knowledge and conveying meaning), its development as a research method began with Allan Nevins, a historian from Columbia University in 1948.<sup>25</sup> In the post war period there was a significant proliferation of interview projects, such as those with Soviet refugees in Europe and the USA, and other similar projects involving people, their opinions, testimonies and personal experiences. During the 1960s the new social groups entering the profession added other voices. An anti-elitist approach in social history emphasized “getting other voices heard.”<sup>26</sup> Progress in technology offered new means of recording and taping the testimonies and conducting interviews; hence oral history could not remain unaffected. Implicitly, this entailed not only new theoretical debates,<sup>27</sup> but subsequently raised new questions concerning the relationship between a historian and his oral sources, which is a human being.

How to treat testimonies obtained from the interviews as sources, how to approach their objectivity, their reliability? Furthermore, are the transcripts to be treated as any other

<sup>25</sup> A. Nevins recorded memoirs of persons important for American life (quoted in A. Thomson, “Fifty Years on : An International Perspective on Oral History” in *The Journal of American History*, 85(2) p 581.

<sup>26</sup> Prof. Marsha Siefert, lecture on oral history, CEU University, Nov. 2009.

<sup>27</sup> For the two most significant debates about the nature of oral history by Cutler and Benison and Staughton Lynd and Jesse Lemisch see J.R. Grele “Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical problems of Oral History” in R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds.) *The Oral History Reader*, London, Routledge, pp 42-44.

written manuscript source or is the tape itself the end product of the interview; or is in fact the interview end product complete unto itself?<sup>28</sup> This already gives us an indication about what is it that makes oral history different. Both methodologically and ethically, the specific relationship between researcher (oral historian) and respondent (interviewee) is crucial. Why? For several reasons; as any interaction, a (biographical) interview is a complex relationship which involves issues of subjectivity (and intersubjectivity), empowerment (an aspect stressed particularly in feminist approach as validating the importance of the interviewee's life experience), authority (who has the authority over the narrative or to what extent is oral history collaborative),<sup>29</sup> and context of the interview, historical and ideological perspectives of both participants. All these factors influence the oral interview as a conversational narrative where emphasis is on the joint activity or collaborative process. While "creating" the data, interviewee and interviewer are working together on creating a life narrative.<sup>30</sup> Alessandro Portelli who emphasizes the personal relationship between a historian and an interviewee to the point that a historian was not only "a stage director" of the interview or the "organizer of the testimony," but additionally, "informants are historians [...] and historian is, in certain ways, a part of the source."<sup>31</sup> Moreover, he argued that "instead of discovering sources, oral historians partly create them"<sup>32</sup> and that "the historian becomes less of a go-between from the working class to the reader, and more and more a protagonist."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> J.R. Grele argues that "[...] the final form of interview is not a transcript [...] neither is it a tape [...], given the active participation of a historian-interviewer [...], the interview can only be described as a conversational narrative[...]" J.R. Grele "Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical problems of Oral History" in R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds.) *The Oral History Reader*, London, Routledge, 1991, p 44.

<sup>29</sup> M.Frisch, "Commentary: Sharing authority: Oral history and the collaborative process" in *The Oral History Review*, 30(1), 2003, p113, "Who is the author of an oral history?" Frisch calls our attention to the connection between the words *author* and *authority* showing how representation is instilled with power.

<sup>30</sup> S.N. Hesse-Biber, and P.L. Leavy, (Eds.), *Feminist Research Practice*, Sage Publications, London 2005, p 170.

<sup>31</sup> A. Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different" in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories*, State University of New York Press 1991, p 57.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p 56.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p 57.

Furthermore, this relationship is very much structured and artificial since the interview situation is not something that occurs spontaneously; it is the interviewer who creates the reality of an interview situation and this is exactly how the situated understandings are being created. This becomes crucial in terms of interpretation of the data obtained and, as R.J. Grele argued, “[T]o analyze an oral interview properly as a conversational narrative, we must combine an analysis of the social and psychological relations between the participants and their appropriateness to the occasion, with our historical analysis.”<sup>34</sup> It is clear how important this relationship is and how the outcomes of an interview are affected by it. That is exactly why necessary information about the interview situation, the relationship and the position of both participants are something to bear in mind while interpreting this kind of data and which should be to a great extent provided and made transparent by the oral historian to those who will access his results as a formed source of knowledge.

All the elements constituted in an oral history interview speak to how complex this method is and how reflexivity and awareness of a researcher have to be on a highest possible level in order to be able to really understand, analyze and be responsible for the future life of the data obtained (co-created).

Here the issue of memory and its qualities play a key role. First of all, one has to direct attention to a well-known fact that memory is not a stable category; It is always determined by a cultural and social context in which it is embedded since;

“[T]here is no ontologically intact reflexivity to the subject which is then placed within a cultural context; that cultural context, as it were, is already there as the disarticulated process of that subject’s production, one that is concealed by the frame that would situate a ready-made subject in an external web of cultural relations.”<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> J.R. Grele “Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical problems of Oral History” in R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds.) *The Oral History Reader*, London, Routledge, 1991, p 44.

<sup>35</sup> J. Butler and J. Scott (eds.) *Feminists Theorize the Political*, New York and London, Routledge, 1992, p 35.



This means that culture creates subjects and not the other way around. What we get are the “cultural stories,” so the cultural repertoire has to be taken into consideration as well, in order to find the meaning of the story told, and that meaning is cultural and situated by the interviewee. Every story deals with what a culture ‘wants’ to remember or to forget on the level of individual psychology, meaning that a story will tell what is encouraged or dissuaded to be remembered in a particular culture - the ways that people tell about memories and the ways they like to be seen.<sup>36</sup> This is an important intersection because, if we are immediately embedded in our culture when we start speaking, and if what we want or do not want to say or remember depends on the kinds of cultural genres that are available at the moment of speaking, then what we do not say is equally as important as what we do choose to say, which in return might make interpretation more or equally important as the account itself.

Moreover, what an oral historian has access to while interviewing a person who is remembering is not the past event, not even its memory, but the *representation* of the memory of an event.<sup>37</sup> This relates to another question posed for the oral history - the obvious problem of the verification of oral sources, Portelli suggests that “oral sources are credible but with a different credibility [...] and the diversity of oral history consists in the fact that “wrong” statements are still psychologically ‘true.’”<sup>38</sup> Not only are oral sources not objective, which is an inherent characteristic of human nature, but they are additionally artificial and variable. This qualification is fine, as long as we are clear that what we are looking for, as Portelli was, is not the objective truth, but the subjective representation of a past experience, and as long as we make it clear to the potential audience to which this subjective truth will be made available.

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<sup>36</sup> S. Leydesdorff, “Gender and Memory, Ten Years on”, in S. Leydesdorff, L. Passerini, P. Thompson (eds.), *Gender and Memory*, New Brunswick and London, 2005, pp1 -17.

<sup>37</sup> A. Portelli, “Memory and the Event” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories*, State University of New York Press 1991, p 51.

<sup>38</sup> A. Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories*, State University of New York Press 1991, p 51.

However, questions seem to line up one after another. One should ask why we need these subjective narratives. Because they show us a micro perspective, a personal perspective “from below” which official history did not care so much about, because they “give voice to the marginalized and oppressed?” Yes, but not only that. “As oral historians we cannot fully know the experiences of others and [...] we are only told that what our narrators see at the moment of telling and what meaning they assigned to that.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, what we need is to be aware of the conceptualization of the experience from something that is true to something that includes constructivity of subjectivity; because it is not subjects who *have* experience, but it is the subjects who *are constituted through* experience.<sup>40</sup>

Criticisms of oral history were, among others, directed towards interviewing and question techniques. As much as we can say that they can be overcome because there is a substantial amount of existent, adequate bibliography that thoroughly addresses these issues, it is often the case that the “[m]any interviewers are poorly trained and far too many are willing to settle for journalistic standards of usefulness. In many projects, too little time is devoted to the research necessary to prepare for an interview.”<sup>41</sup> This speaks to the necessity of the highest standards of training and research also to be expected of oral historians.

However, even though a researcher can be well trained and prepared, the question of *how* he is going to apply the methodology is important to the aim of his research project. The illustration of this can be seen through the approach in a very well-known oral history project – the book *Death of Luigi Trastulli and other stories*<sup>42</sup> by Alessandro Portelli. Portelli believes that “the most precious information may lie in what the informants hide, and in the

<sup>39</sup> S. Leydesdorff, “Gender and Memory, Ten Years on”, in S. Leydesdorff, L. Passerini, P. Thompson (eds.), *Gender and Memory, New Brunswick and London*, 2005, pp1 -17.

<sup>40</sup> Prof. Andrea Peto, lecture on Oral History and the Representation of the Memory of Experience, 10 March 2010, CEU University.

<sup>41</sup> J.R. Grele “Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical problems of Oral History” in R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds.) *The Oral History Reader*, London, Routledge, p 40, 1991.

<sup>42</sup> See footnote 33.

fact that they do *hide* it, rather than in what they tell.”<sup>43</sup> By limiting his subject matter to nonhegemonic classes (factory workers), Portelli to some extent justified the emphasis on oral sources and oral history as an autonomous discipline and independent historical project.

The feminist approach challenges the privileged position of the researcher (interviewer) as the knowledgeable person that has control over the research process and its results. Historically, the researcher’s authority over the data included analysis, representation/writing, and the dissemination of the resulting knowledge.<sup>44</sup> What is encouraged is the “holistic” approach – collaboration between the participants in the interview during all phases of the knowledge production process. Moreover, the feminist approach, while accessing “women’s voices” tries to shift the focus of authority also to the interviewee as “[...] they are committed to destabilizing relations of oppression and making those historically at the peripheries of the social order the center of the knowledge construction process.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, the process of producing knowledge is a circular process, because the feminist research was formulated as “research by, about and for women”<sup>46</sup> where both interviewer and interview learn and develop through personal experience and self-reflection.

Furthermore, for feminist oral history practice, it is important not only to record the undocumented experience and to empower those groups of society who were not represented in history, but also to learn about each other (the idea of sisterhood) to show not only how and what happened but also how a person felt about it and what it meant to her. There was a discontinuity, a gap in knowledge since women’s experiences and realities have been different from men’s in crucial ways due to the fact that, according to the feminist position, “women’s perspectives were not absent simply as a result of oversight but had been suppressed,

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p 53.

<sup>44</sup> K. Anderson, S. Armitage, D. Jack and J. Wittner, “Beginning Where We Are: Feminist Methodology In Oral History”, *Oral History Review* 15, Spring 1987, pp 103-127.

<sup>45</sup> S.N. Hesse-Biber, and P.L. Leavy, (Eds.), *Feminist Research Practice*, Sage Publications, London 2005, p 173.

<sup>46</sup> For a discussion of the criteria of feminist scholarship see Joan Acker, Kate Barry and Joke Essevelt “Objectivity and Truth: Problems in Doing Feminist Research”, *Women’s Studies International Forum* 6, 1983 and Sandra Harding “Introduction: Is there a Feminist Method?” in *Feminism and Methodology*, ed. S. Harding, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987.

trivialized, ignored, or reduced to the status of gossip and folk wisdom by dominant research traditions institutionalized in academic settings and in scientific disciplines.” There was ‘female world’ to be discovered and documented and feminist research saw the phenomena of everyday life as politics. “The personal is political” was transformed by researchers into “the personal is researchable” or “research can be personal,”<sup>47</sup> with all its possible implications. Therefore, the experience showed that the defined feminist scholarship (by, about and for women) is not so simple; it positioned a scholar in a complex web of relationships and responsibilities which in return added a new dimension to oral history as research done “by” women. In the words of Patai and Gluck this means that “[a] story that in its oral form, is “by” the speaker, very often reaches the public in the form of a text “by” the scholar [...]”<sup>48</sup> which a reader should be informed to bear in mind, although an interview should not be understood as just another source of evidence to be extracted. However, the “woman’s voice” is questionable if we look at the text as a product, since it is always the question of a “bargaining position” between the interviewer and interviewee.

Furthermore, in spite of many advantages of oral history such as empowerment, giving voice to marginalized and invisible, the created body of previously non-existing knowledge and many more; by examining different moments in the production of oral history it became obvious to the feminist researchers that narrator and interviewer are not really equal partners. This imbalance of power was evident to them in many women’s oral history projects which then led to the conclusion that broadening of the methodological and interpretative perspective was needed. This resulted in an important interdisciplinary feature of feminist

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<sup>47</sup> S.Reinharz, “The Principle of Feminist Research, a Matter of Debate” in Messer-Davidow, Elen, *Disciplining Feminism*, Durham: Duke University Press p 426, 2002.

<sup>48</sup> S.B.Gluck and D.Patai (Eds) *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice Of Oral History*, introduction, London, Routledge 1991, p 3.

practice of oral history which embraced insights from disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, folklore, psychology and contemporary literary theory.<sup>49</sup>

Feminist researchers' aim to make sure that women are the subjects and not the objects of study is brave and praiseworthy, but difficult to accomplish as it requires all these multiple skills and interdisciplinary teams for interpreting materials of oral history projects. Just like some feminist scholars rightfully noted: "[...] oral history should involve more than simply gathering accounts from informants, itself a difficult process involving considerable skill. These bits of evidence we collect-subjectively reconstructed lives, contain within them formidable problems of interpretation [...] we also need to move beyond individual accounts to make much more systematic use of our interviews."<sup>50</sup>

What I want to point to is that if "the memory itself is to be taken as a subject of the study,"<sup>51</sup> then interviews need to be well contextualized and all of these aspects have to be taken into account – who is speaking, what is their social, personal or political agenda, gender, race and class. Or, bearing in mind the feminist debates about the social construction of memory and theoretical dilemmas posed by post-structuralist and postmodernist approaches to language, one could agree with Joan Sangster<sup>52</sup> who holds that grounding oral narratives in their social and material context and thoroughly analyzing the relationships between them are indispensable if we want to have any insight on narrative form, on representation and on their connection with critique of oppression and inequality.

Having therefore presented the specificities and problematics of oral history and its practice by feminists, I will only stress once more that the relationship between memory,

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., Fields of linguistics and speech communication helped recognize the importance of analysis of woman's speech patterns and of interview as a linguistic event; folklore emphasized narration as performance; from psychology awareness of subjectivity and memory in shaping narratives is gained and contemporary literary theory challenged the older historian's tendency to see oral history as a transparent representation of experience and created awareness that the typical product of an interview is a text, not a reproduction of reality, and that models of textual analysis were therefore needed.

<sup>50</sup> See footnote 42

<sup>51</sup> M.Frisch, "The Memory of History," in *Radical History Review*, no 25, 1981 p 16.

<sup>52</sup> J. Sangster expressed this opinion in an article about women factory workers. J. Sangster "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History" in *Oral History Reader*, (Eds.) Perks and Thomson, 1994.

experience and its representation through the cooperative process of an interview with all its implications is very complex and needs to be accounted for. All the above-mentioned methodological, theoretical and interpretative problems also need to be taken into account when thinking about and accessing an oral history project and the body of knowledge that it creates.

### ***1.3. POSTSOCIALISM ON SOCIALISM***

The broader contextualization of oral history projects in Eastern and Central Europe deals with the frame of socialist time (until 1989 and 1991 when the Soviet Union dismantled and Yugoslavia disappeared in the former SFRJ form) and the post-socialist proliferation of memory studies, biographical and ethnographic research that has been done on it. The significance of memory, in particular in Eastern Europe, after the fall of communism can be explained as one of the rare tools of access to the past or a source of authentic personal experience after decades of censored, centrally written history. Memory emerged because it was no longer hindered. Trauma studies and Holocaust studies, interdisciplinary fields of inquiry with progressive debates on revision and silence, served as one frame for the oral histories of totalitarianism.<sup>53</sup> Trauma studies have shown how silence is being produced and have found meaning in what cannot be written witnessed or remembered (the paradigm of the unspeakable).<sup>54</sup> Oral history has in these cases moved beyond its original and, as Passerini said, “naïve assumptions” that one of its tasks was to simply “give voice” to those who had been silenced by history. Because, as La Capra already had warned about the universalization

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<sup>53</sup> R. Crownshaw and S. Leydesdorff, “Introduction to the Transaction Edition“ in *Memory and Totalitarianism* (ed.) L. Passerini, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 2005.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

of trauma and over-extending the categories of survivors and victims,<sup>55</sup> the call of oral historians is to analyze the “grey zones,”<sup>56</sup> not to generalize the experience of totalitarianism but to analyze the subjective experience of totalitarian systems. Thus totalitarianism when seen through the method of oral history cannot be rendered as a homogenized system which was the same for everyone. The advantage of the oral history method is precisely that it provides a possibility for a variety of narratives of people who shared the same situation and same historical moment, by focusing on the personal, individual experience. The risk that the comparative study of the impact of totalitarian regimes on memory runs is that of being overshadowed by a politics of memory that has required including past traumas with a comparative approach.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, all the interdisciplinary tools (already described in the previous sub-chapter) facilitated new strategies for analysis of oral testimonies, bringing in, for instance, the theme of gender,<sup>58</sup> class or ethnicity.<sup>59</sup> On the one hand, it is important that oral historians are aware and can recognize and examine the patterns, the genres<sup>60</sup> (as official life formulas) in which their respondents are speaking about their lives under a certain regime, and on the other to differentiate between subjectivities within the same system or across different systems.<sup>61</sup> This means that people who lived under some totalitarian regime are not

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p 9.

<sup>56</sup> The notion of “grey zones” – i.e. Robert Antelme’s *The Human Race* (1957, 1998) - a memoir of Buchenwald seeks to humanize and thereby understand perpetrators, rather than see them as “demonic” other to the victims.

<sup>57</sup> R. Crownshaw and S. Leydesdorff, “Introduction to the Transaction Edition” in *Memory and Totalitarianism* (ed.) L. Passerini, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 2005, p11. For example, Germany’s historian’s debate – Historikerstreit - was an attempt to relativize and neutralize Holocaust memory by comparing Auschwitz and Gulag. R.Evans, “The New Nationalism and The Old History: Perspectives on the West German Historikerstreit” in *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Dec., 1987).

<sup>58</sup> Such were the *International Mathausen Documentation Project* 2001-2003 and much empirical research done in Italy, Germany and Austria, Rotkirch in Bertaux and Thompson 2004; A. Peto, NY 2002-as quoted in *Memory and Totalitarianism* (ed.) L. Passerini, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 2005.

<sup>59</sup> Examples are the contributions of A.A. Tart “Estonian inclined Communists as Marginals”, Z. Kusa “Inequality and Exclusion in the History of poor Slovak Families”; Shame, A. Rotkirch “Promiscuity and Social Mobility in Russian Autobiographies from poor Working Class Millieux” in R. Humphrey, R. Miller and E. Zdravomyslova (eds.) *Biographical Research in Eastern Europe*, Ashgate Hampshire, 2002 p71, 225, 263.

<sup>60</sup> The Mathausen Project was an example of looking into the genres that shaped oral histories and which were informed by the informant’s cultural lives before and after the Holocaust ([http://en.mauthausen-memorial.at/index\\_open.php](http://en.mauthausen-memorial.at/index_open.php)).

<sup>61</sup> R. Crownshaw and S. Leydesdorff, “Introduction to the Transaction Edition-“ in *Memory and Totalitarianism* (ed.) L. Passerini, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, 2005, p14.

necessarily defined just by a victim status nor should they be over-determined by a model of the regime.

Therefore, the key issue of oral history as a method in post-socialist or any other kind of transitional period is to look into the mechanisms and patterns that make unsanctioned recollections form under one ideology when one historical interpretation was meant to be accepted by all. Strategies of opposition<sup>62</sup> (which of course had to be masked) in a regime where the private sphere almost did not exist, (meaning that both private and the public sphere belonged and were controlled by the Party, including communication), can only be examined through oral history's focus on the mechanics of shared memory and hidden histories.<sup>63</sup>

Knowing how people tell their life story and choices they make by doing so are the opportunities for oral history to fully show its capacities especially in periods when great social change occurs. Why it is so can be explained by the fact that

“[...] most life history interviewees will gravitate directly to the times of greatest change in their lives especially if they are allowed to do so with a minimum of direction; [moreover], a series of related historical events happening in close sequence can have the effect of fundamentally transforming the social and political life in a society so that the events come to be seen as a ‘historical watershed.’”<sup>64</sup>

The fall of communism in 1989 in Central and Eastern Europe and the transition from socialism was precisely such an event. The newly written history should avail itself of the oral history accounts which are concerned with challenging meanings and representations of the past under real state socialism. Putting together these various pieces of different individual representations of the past, different subjectivities might help make sense of memory.

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<sup>62</sup> For discussion of opposition, resistance and subversion under state socialism see, A. Anagnost, *National past-times : narrative, representation, and power in modern China*, Duke University Press, 1997, I. Rev, *Retroactive justice : prehistory of post-communism*, Stanford University Press, 2005, C.Sabel and D.Stark “Planning, politics and shop- floor power: “Hidden Forms of bargaining in Soviet- imposed state - socialist societies” in *Politics and Society*, vol 11, 1982, pp 439-75.

<sup>63</sup> R.S. Watson *Memory, History and opposition under state socialism*, Santa Fe 1994, p7

<sup>64</sup> R. Humphrey, R. Miller and E. Zdravomyslova (eds.) *Biographical Research in Eastern Europe*, Ashgate Hampshire, 2002, p4.



#### **1.4. MY INTERVIEWS – METHODOLOGY**

The following research I have conducted generally regards the interviews with oral historians of diverse scholarly backgrounds, whose experience in oral history and its methodology comes from different projects with different aims. However, the primary focus that more closely relates to this thesis are the interviews where my interviewees were women who were involved and collaborated in different ways on the Women's Memory international oral history project founded in 1996 in Prague. The difference in their involvement with the project comes from the position/role they had in it, the extent to which they embraced its mission, aim and methodology and the extent to which they changed the aim or methodology of their individual, national team's project.

In this group of interviews, the research is focusing on the case of Serbian, Montenegrin, and Croatian teams participating in the international project, and on their coordinators, including the interview with the project's international coordinator in Prague.

#### **My method and interview style**

I have chosen the semi-structured interview<sup>65</sup> as the most adequate form for this kind of data to be obtained because of the limited research period. A similar method is used in anthropology by the name of Rapid Assessment Procedure<sup>66</sup> (according to Minnesota State University Mankato). Since this method is based on the use of an interview guide, my set of questions was prepared in advance in written form for the interviews I scheduled. These questions were planned in a fashion so that I could cover topics that I wanted to address in a particular order. The interviews took place at different

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<sup>65</sup> H.R. Bernard, "Unstructured and Semi-structured Interviews" in R. Bernard *Research Methods in Anthropology*, AltaMira Press, Oxford 1995.

<sup>66</sup> Minnesota State University Mankato, <http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/methods/RAPs.html/15/05/2010>: "The method of Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAPs) is useful when anthropologists need to complete their research in a short period of time. RAPs are a combination of anthropological knowledge and methods, such as sampling, interview, observation, and data analysis."

locations suggested by the interviewees themselves. In most of the cases, the interviews which I took personally- “face to face,” were conducted in a working place of the interviewee, or in a public, but quiet place such as a restaurant. Exceptions due to practical limitations were the interviews on telephone and via e-mail.

### **Bias and strategy:**

It is inevitable to mention here the implications of bias which are well known as an inherent part of the interview, and which should be kept in mind. Generally speaking, there are three main sources of bias (Scott and Marshall, 2004): 1. the interviewer (who may, for example, have prejudices or ask leading questions); 2. the respondent (who may wish to lie or evade questions) and 3. the actual interview situation (especially the physical and social setting).

As much as the first source of bias is concerned, the questions I have asked were to great extent open-ended questions,<sup>67</sup> to encourage a full, meaningful answer using the respondent’s own knowledge and/or feelings. This meant that I would start with a broad question about how their involvement with the International Women's Memory Project started, in order to give them time to begin remembering the beginnings of the project from the point they themselves wish to start from, bearing in mind that this very possibly is not a story told for the first time, but more likely a "ready story" probably already constructed for similar interviews done before. Furthermore, I would first state the problem or a common knowledge about the topic, and pose the question in the second one (framing of an open-ended question postulated by the oral historian Charles Morrissey). For instance: “It seems that this kind of interviewing involves the interviewer as much as the interviewee. How do you feel about this interaction?” and then possibly use the follow up

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<sup>67</sup> Closed ended question would in this case be” When did the project start and did you know that you wanted to be a part of it from the very beginning”? And the open-ended:” Tell me about the beginnings of the project and how did you get interested in it?

questions such as "Do you feel that some of your personal experiences or curiosities could have influenced the flow of the interview?"

However, I avoided asking two-folded questions such as i.e. "How did the project start and how did you get involved in it?" or "When did you usually intervene in the narrating and in which way?" Instead I asked two separate questions to avoid merger of the two experiences in the memory and hence in the answer of the interviewee. The use of fixed wording questions, one of the methods for reducing interviewer bias, is something I could apply only in a broad sense; Although the questions were in a written form, the personal interaction often required adaptations in the moment, depending on the gained information which I could not predict, in order to gain as many details as possible. Moreover, there were also topics which the informants themselves touched upon by answering one of the questions (which were not a part of my plan) and which would then open a possibility for a new set of questions from my side. I made this choice in my approach, since my aim was not to get only the answers to the exact questions I wrote, but to stay open in the interview situation without leading it in any precisely determined direction, which would have, in my view, limited the obtained data to a large extent.

When it comes to the probing as one of the most important ways of stimulating interviewee to provide us with more information, the type of probing I mostly seemed to use was the so-called "silent probe" or "neutral probe"<sup>68</sup> where I simply tried to stay quiet and wait for the respondent to continue. Or I would just use the affirmative noises like "uh-uh," "aha," "I see..." and similar not to interrupt the flow of the narration and not to involve myself too much, which would bear the risk of getting my own reflection in the data. By describing this, I am not saying that in this way we can obtain "better" information, but my attitude was that the more information I get, the better. Otherwise, I used follow up

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<sup>68</sup> Matarazzo 1964, as quoted in H.R. Bernard, "Unstructured and Semi-structured Interviews" in R. Bernard *Research Methods in Anthropology*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed, AltaMira Press, 2006.

questions, statements of fact which I had learned about, comments or brief observations” but not all the national teams in the project had the same aim of their research...?”

The phone interviews are conducted with a similar method, yet this way of interviewing inherently bears a particular bias in itself. Although they might have certain advantages for more sensitive topics (Scott and Marshall, 2004), they also have disadvantages. First of all, you can not see the facial expression of the person on the other side of the line and vice versa. Therefore, the reaction to your question or the actual feeling that could be detected on a person’s face during the answer is very important for interpreting the attitude that the person has toward the topic on the one hand, and establishing a close, friendly atmosphere and trust on the other.

Regarding the second source of bias - the respondent (who may wish to lie or evade questions) - my stand here was to believe the experiences of my respondents since any kind of mistrust from my side would be (especially in non-verbal communication) detected as a "trust breaker," a most undesirable aspect of an interview. Firstly, it was impossible to check the data given to me in the interview in such a short period (the language differences would not make things easier in certain cases) and the only way to get a possible fuller account of one side was to compare it to the replies of other sides, which actually helped as another probing technique which I used - the "phased assertion."<sup>69</sup> This is when "you act like you already know something in order to get people to open up. Phased assertion also prompts some informants to jump in and correct you if they think that you know too little or that you've got it all wrong." Regarding the third source of bias - the actual interview situation (especially the physical and social setting) - the bias is here, in my view, reduced to minimum, since we either had an office space, a library or a restaurant with neutral observers which we made sure were far from us.

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<sup>69</sup> Kirk and Miller, 1986 as quoted in R. Bernard, "Unstructured and Semi structured Interviews", *Research Methods in Anthropology*, AltaMira Press, Oxford 1995.

## **CHAPTER 2 – THE”WOMEN'S MEMORY” PROJECT AND ITS RESEARCHERS: A DEBATE ON METHOD**

### ***2.1. INTRODUCTION***

The fall of communism in 1989 and the lifting of the Iron Curtain saw a proliferation of oral history projects about which I have spoken in more detail in chapter 1. The Women's Memory Project is an international Oral history project which fits into this category. It was initiated in 1996 in Prague with the aim to “grasp the history of women under socialism, in all its complexity [...] and] to challenge the established myths and clichés about 'socialist woman,' often presented as some kind of heroic female tractor driver.”<sup>70</sup> Having in mind the important methodological and theoretical specificities of oral history and particularly its feminist practice, my aim is to direct the attention to precisely these issues through the choices and (different) approaches that the individual teams of the Women's Memory project have made. This becomes important, since these choices that the researchers make and the ways they apply the method inevitably influence the end results of the research. Furthermore, this implies that all these inherent influences, biases (whose sources are different) reflect on the body of knowledge created by the oral history research. Therefore, together with the aspects of coherence, funding, shared issues and points of difference between the national teams, I will reflect upon what is, firstly, the nature of the previously mentioned limitations, and to what extent can they be traced in the end result (the published interviews); and secondly – what are the implications of these limitations on the targeted audience will be further examined in the last chapter of the thesis.

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<sup>70</sup> <http://www.womensmemory.net/english/project.asp> (30/05/2010).

## **2.2 RECONSTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S MEMORY PROJECT BY CATEGORIES**

The interview guidelines (as shown in the table 2.1) provided empirical generalizations of my interviewees from their individual perspectives of the project. In order to reconstruct the various aspects and issues within the Women's Memory project, I will not report from the interviews in their original flow. However I will provide my understanding of these questions and their respective answers in categories (seen as grouped, topic-wise interrelated questions) which I detected as the key points concerning the project, its aims, methodology and outcomes. This will be carried out through comparison of the interview narratives of my respondents (see table 2.2.).

### **Initial idea and the aim of the project**

The idea of what was later named the Women's Memory project was formulated by Czech dissident sociologist Jiřina Šiklová after her trip to the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 with other participants from both East and West when they had the chance to discuss many topics of interest. The background for the discussions that took place and more importantly for the project to be later initiated was the proliferation of scholarly articles and books written by Western feminists. These studies on the emancipation of women from socialist countries (which they started to visit in the beginning of the 1990s) made coarse generalizations and distorted the image of women from Eastern and Central Europe who could not recognize themselves in them. What caused this misinterpretation was that these scholars wrote from their own experience, from different social and cultural perspectives, using often inapplicable paradigms.<sup>71</sup> After discussing this issue, women from

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<sup>71</sup> J. Šiklová "Women's Memory: Searching for Identity within Socialism" published on The Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Sciences website: (<http://www.svu2000.org/women/siklova.rtf>, 2004-10-22), on the genesis and origin of the project see also Z. Kizková (ed.) *Women's Memory - the Experience of Self-Shaping in*

gender centres agreed that “it is highly important that we evaluate our own history according to our own and not any adopted criteria, and that it is equally important to embrace our ‘otherness,’ and thus to bring forward the issue of the identity of women living in socialism.”<sup>72</sup>

At the time, J. Šiklová explained that in her view the purpose of reconstructing the past and recording the experiences of women was to serve as a pre-condition and inspiration for social and political activities of future generations of women as well as a source of their self-confidence.<sup>73</sup> However, in Kizková’s words “the main intention of the project was to give women an opportunity to express themselves and to phrase the experiences of their lives during the forty years of socialism.”<sup>74</sup> Pavla Frydlova, the international coordinator, stated that the long term objective of the project was to identify the roots of the still existing patriarchal model of the society, to understand and accept the specific nature of woman’s attitude to the world, and thus contribute not only to the discussion about the roles of men and women, but also to stimulate concrete changes of persisting gender stereotypes.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, since the idea was that the project should have an international and comparative character, differences and similarities of the life of women in former socialist countries and the different kinds of their emancipations were to be traced from the findings of individual teams. It is important to mention here that different national teams could formulate a sort of “personalized” aim for their own project, thus emphasizing the areas they found most important to cover, and deciding whether to extend the study by clarifying the historical context of their country.<sup>76</sup>

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*Bibliographical Interviews*, Iris, Bratislava 2006 p 10-12 and the project’s website ( <http://www.womensmemory.net/english/project.asp>).

<sup>72</sup> J. Šiklová “Women’s Memory: Searching for Identity within Socialism”, see footnote 1.

<sup>73</sup> Z. Kizková (ed.) *Women’s Memory - the Experience of Self-Shaping in Bibliographical Interviews*, Iris, Bratislava 2006 p 11.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p15.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p 15.

<sup>76</sup> Biljana Kasic, philosopher and the leader of the Women’s Memory project from the Centre of Woman Studies in Zagreb, formulated four aims for the Zagreb group: 1.raise awareness among women about their own lives,

Dijana Dijanic, a historian who edited “Zenski biografski leksikon- Sjećanje žena na život u socijalizmu” (*Women's Biographical Dictionary - Women's Memories of Life in Socialism*) published by the Women's Studies in Zagreb, explained her view on the aim of the book stating that “the aim of the book was to inscribe women's experiences, knowledge and identities in the official history [...] we wanted to underline those questions from our past which were and still are important to women and not to the daily politics or the yearly statistics reports.”<sup>77</sup> My question to Dijanic was related exactly to the purpose of the “dictionary” part of the publication which contained different documents, photos and references explaining the broader historical background of the time. The Croatian team was one of the rare teams who extended their study showing the connection with the “official” history and historical context. Dijanic explained that

“[...] our subjects were also different archives of women societies, official statistics and women's magazines in order to show that women are a part of history and society by shaping them as they shaped their lives. When we wanted to publish the interviews, we understood that the fact that we knew and understood certain notions, important events and women politicians of the time, does not necessarily mean that the broader, especially younger public had to know anything about it [...] we published the dictionary in addition to the interviews in order to make reading and understanding of the importance and the meaning of the narrative easier and more clear.”<sup>78</sup>

Here is where we come to another very important aim of the project which is implicitly or explicitly generally accepted by all the individual teams: aiming not only for the scholarly (academic) audience, but to a much broader public. This becomes important when we think in terms of knowledge production and visibility (transparency) of certain information and sources that were not represented (enough or at all) in the official historical

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changes of their identities, concepts they have about themselves, about time, dignity and self-evaluation 2. gain knowledge about ourselves – women-by uncovering memories and collecting women's life stories 3. attain knowledge about women's lives by means of understanding the social context and placement of the women's lives within this context (during socialism) 4. Create the opportunity to ask questions about how one's life experience is related to the experiences of other women. In: *Aktivistkinje - kako "opismeniti" teoriju*, Centar za zenske studije, Zagreb 2000.

<sup>77</sup> N. Petrinjak did the interview with D. Dijanic in the Croatian weekly *Zarez*, 5/05/2005, no. 154

<sup>78</sup> Interview with Dijana Dijanic via e-mail, 5/23/2010



discourse. Women's experiences, their contributions in history and their biographies were not even remotely present in the text books or as a part of the existing university studies in this part of Europe compared to those of men. All of my interviewees seem very aware of this aim although they see it from a particular, personal angle and formulate it in different ways.

Therefore, "giving voice to women" is not only making them visible, and it has a much broader impact. As Jiřina řiklová stated "[b]ased on the premise that the 'personal is political,' the aims of the project are not theoretical, but practical, if you want – they should serve 'the public enlightenment,' broad public and civic society. Bringing together both these criteria – the political, or towards the civic society oriented praxis, and the academic, represents the major shape of the project."<sup>79</sup> Svenka Savic also merged these aims in the Vojvodina project because, first of all in Vojvodina, where the attention was always paid to the educational and cultural aspects of the life of minority groups, the data about women (particularly ordinary women) was either missing either insufficient. Hence, the gathered materials, after ten years represent a substantial data basis for the reconstruction of the history of socialist times and life of individuals in their everyday life, taking into account women and their experiences. The second aim of the project was educational since the "Women Studies and Research" from Novi Sad is educating many students from precisely these ethnic groups (Slovakian, Hungarian, Ruthenian etc.), and the students were trained to interview women using the Oral History method, in their own community in order to get an academic degree.<sup>80</sup>

Similarly, for Nadezda Radovic, who also stresses the importance of these sources for the history of everyday life, she added that in her opinion another important aspect of the aim of the project is the field of women's communication: "[b]ecause women do not have social experience; they are more turned to their inner self and towards family then toward the public. Hence, this is a chance both for them and the interviewers to make their experiences and

<sup>79</sup> J. řiklová "Women's Memory: Searching for Identity within Socialism", see footnote 1.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Svenka Savic.

convictions a part of the public space. By speaking up, women are taking part in the public sphere and these lives become legitimate facts within this sphere. In fact, making a greater number of these life stories public, gives strength to these experiences which in return give women more self confidence that some of their unpleasant ones are not something they should be ashamed of; they are rather something that society allowed and now they have the chance to solidarize regarding these issues.”<sup>81</sup>

### **2.3 ORIGINAL METHODOLOGY – MODIFIED METHODOLOGY**

Frydlova’s experience in biographical interviews conducted in her earlier project with women on film (movie directors) in Eastern Europe<sup>82</sup> drew upon and set bases for methodology to be developed in years to come for the Women’s Memory project. In her words: “back then, in the beginning of the 1990s this method was not yet known in the Czech Republic under the name of oral history and only sociologists and ethnologist had been using it.”<sup>83</sup> When Jiřina Šiklová’s idea took shape in 1996, Frydlova’s involvement was only logical. The project was thought out to be an open model of testing feminist methodology and the participants’ task in it. As Šiklová put it, “[t]he feminist methodology is at the same time both a challenge and a process, and since it is a dynamic process – it cannot be measured and compared in any way [...] (however) critical research is [...] an integral part of the process.”<sup>84</sup>

An important aspect of feminist research methodology which the project embraced in some of its elements is emphasized in the approach that each woman-respondent was not the object but the subject of the research. “She helps create the content and form of the interview because she is allowed to decide what, when and how she will narrate [...] [F]eminist research

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<sup>81</sup> Interview with Nadezda Radovic by phone, 05/26/2010

<sup>82</sup> Pavla Frydlova’s research fellowship in Germany from 1992 - 1993 resulted in the study *Frauen Filme in Osteuropa* [Women’s Film in East Europe], Berlin: Trafo Verlag, 1996.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with P. Frydlova .

<sup>84</sup> J. Šiklová “Women’s Memory: Searching for Identity within Socialism” published on The Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Sciences website: (<http://www.svu2000.org/women/siklova.rtf>. 2004-10-22).

contains views according to which hierarchical relations between the researchers and the woman whose life is examined, cannot be fully disbanded by avoidance and solidarization. What matters much more is the ability to take into account and not withhold the dynamic of these relationships in the research process.”<sup>85</sup>

This dynamics of searching for a method began with the pilot phase on the national level in 1996- 97 when about thirty interviews were conducted. This was the initial, experimental phase because “we had to study, to test the method since nobody really had any experience in it.” Afterwards the experience was shared with the colleagues from Poland and the former GDR and another pilot phase began, co-sponsored by the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung where they worked together on developing the methodology, verifying it in practice, appraising interviews and thinking of how to make transcriptions and how to process them.

Since the idea from the start was that the project should have an international character, in 1999 the methodological consensus was achieved after several international meetings, at the fourth methodological seminar held in Croatia in the island of Brac where representatives of six countries participated (the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Croatia and Germany). The methodology was to be the binding element for every future national team who would join the project, although each team was also autonomous and responsible for their own financing.

As Frydlova explains, each woman interviewee is given detailed information about the goals and intentions of the project. The interview starts with an open question: “Tell us something about your life” and the interviewee is assured that there is, as much as she needs to spend. Since the interviewer should not influence the course and the order in which the respondent chooses to speak, Frydlova remembers that in many cases the interviewee often asked: “ [...] and where should I start?” She would reply that she can start wherever she feels

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<sup>85</sup>Z. Kizková (ed.) *Women's Memory - the Experience of Self-Shaping in Bibliographical Interviews*, Iris, Bratislava 2006.

like starting. This is also an important methodological aspect because “already the way in which a woman chooses to start speaking shows the way in which she perceives herself. For example, some women would start with: ‘Today I am a professor and I came this far ...,’ thus emphasizing the career aspect. Others would start by saying ‘I was born in the countryside; I was brought up by my grandmother ...,’ giving their women’s genealogy. Or they would begin ‘I have two children...,’ which stressed the importance of family. Hence, the way they begin to talk is already putting an accent on what is important for them.” Kovacevic recalling that “some women would start telling their life from their birth and some would start from their present situation.”<sup>86</sup>

Kiczková adds that the question can be formulated more broadly,<sup>87</sup> encouraging the interviewee to speak must not be limited by any issues; however the specific period of life or certain stages that are priorities of the researcher should be indicated.<sup>88</sup> She names this stage of the interview “autonomously originating central narration” (biographical self - presentation) because “the direction ought to be fully hers, regardless of whether she is telling a story, or presenting an argumentative sequence [...] in this part of the interview, the speaker talks freely about herself and her life. The researcher should not ask questions or interrupt her in order to give her narration a certain structure or direct it to topics that are the subject of her research.”<sup>89</sup> Frydlova agreed, adding that only after she had finished this first part of her narrative, could additional questions be asked. She also shared that in the first year of interviewing mistakes were made because interviewers would jump in the narrative too often, asking questions about things they wanted to know. This was discovered by re-listening to interviews and by analysing them in work shops (on the national level only because it was

<sup>86</sup> Interview with Ljupka Kovacevic.

<sup>87</sup> Z. Kiczková (ed.) *Women’s Memory - the Experience of Self-Shaping in Bibliographical Interviews*, Iris, Bratislava 2006: “We are interested in finding out how women remember the life they lived. Your generation experienced several great social changes and breaking points - including the period of socialism. But let’s start much earlier; let’s start with your childhood. Could you please tell me something about all the events and experiences you can remember from your childhood?”

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid .

soon realized that working with the translations was impossible).<sup>90</sup> The German<sup>91</sup> and the Czech team<sup>92</sup> put together a set of questions which was used mainly as an instruction manual and as inspiration before posing the final questions used in the part where the self evaluating reflection of the woman should be solicited. However Frydlova also stressed that these questions were never held in front of the interviewee as a check list. It was more of a guide which every interviewer should keep in her memory and use them depending on the situation.<sup>93</sup> The Slovak team developed a slightly different strategy. They did not make an adaptable line of questions; instead they tried to formulate what would they aspire to reach and learn in areas like: 1.family (learning about a specific form of female genealogy and communication), 2.partnership (learning about different kinds of relationships which the speakers entered and which they helped create; attempt to deconstruct female stereotypes).3. physical issues (the issue of the female body is still a taboo) 4. free time (to help create a full picture of the narrators personality and reconstruct the forms of “female” free time).<sup>94</sup>

The importance of these methodological steps connects to another methodological feature which refers more to the analysis of the interviews which the individual teams were to make according to their own capacities and choices. If an interviewer intervenes by asking

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<sup>90</sup> Interview with Pavla Frydlova.

<sup>91</sup> Quoted in Z. Kiczková (ed.) *Women's Memory - the Experience of Self-Shaping in Bibliographical Interviews*, Iris, Bratislava 2006, p 48: **set of the German team's (OWEN) questions:** What memories do you have of your grandmother? And what are your memories of your mother? Which people were of particular importance to you in your childhood and adolescence? What was your conception of life when you were a young girl? Which of your ideas could you realize and which could you not? Why did you/ didn't you give up? How did you survive the war? Can you describe your typical day with children? What are you proud of? What did you achieve and how? What is your greatest disappointment? Can you describe the first apartment/house you owned? What do you like doing most/ what activities do you like most? What time (period) was the most wonderful/important for you? What advice (life wisdom) would you like to pass onto your children?.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, **set of the Czech team's (Gender Studies, Prague) questions:** The added questions: Can you tell me what period in your life was the toughest? What do you think is important in the life of a woman? What has changed in your life since you are retired? Can I ask what role did the religion or belief played in your life? In your view, what is the main difference between the ways of life practiced by your mother, yourself and your daughter/ daughter in law? What conditions did the socialism create for women? What did you like and what did you not like? If you had to recollect years of Czechoslovak history, i.e. 1948, 1968, 1989, what did these years mean to you? What is your experience of the year 1968? What did you think about transition from one regime to another? Is there anything I forgot to ask you, something we haven't talked about and you would like to share?

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Pavla Frydlova.

<sup>94</sup> Z. Kiczková (ed.) *Women's Memory - the Experience of Self-Shaping in Bibliographical Interviews*, Iris, Bratislava 2006, p 48.

questions, even if it is in search for additional details, she could disturb the interviewee's structuring of her presentation (reconstruction) and suggest answers which in return distort exactly what is aimed for the explanation of the structure of biographical self- perception and the meaning of her life experience.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, by posing new questions, the interviewer might get the details and answers that she is searching for, but the point is that "these need not be identical with what the speaker has in mind."<sup>96</sup> However, these are the ideal cases<sup>97</sup> when the spontaneous narration of a woman starts in this first part of the interview. In many cases, for different reasons, unfolding does not set off that quickly or easily and the interviewer can find herself in the situation where she feels that it is necessary to intervene by posing additional questions.<sup>98</sup> Some of my questions<sup>99</sup> addressed this issue and it seemed that the opinions and approaches slightly differ.

Mitro, who was in charge of the archive of the Vojvodina project (but who also conducted several interviews included in the publications), asserts that her interventions during the interviews were minimal. Even if the woman would answer briefly to some topics, she would stick to the protocol of the project; she also added that "there are very few life stories in the archives of the Women Studies that show this tendency. I noted them in the interviews of the young researchers in cases when they had interviewed a person who they were in a close relationship with and these interventions we characterized as a 'mistake in the research process.'"<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, both Savic and Dijanic held that they used prompting questions in the situations when they found it necessary to obtain further explanations or information.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p 43.

<sup>97</sup> Z. Kiczko<sup>va</sup> stated that in the interviewing experience of the Slovak team, the structure of the interviews resembled individual stages of the ideal type of a narrative interview as described by W. Fischer Rosenthal and Gabriele Rosenthal

<sup>98</sup> See footnote 9, p 44.

<sup>99</sup> There were three questions referring to this issue: 1. How much did you intervene in the narration of your interviewee? 2. Did you prompt the respondent to talk in a certain direction if she was too succinct about some topics and answered briefly? 3. If you did, how was this prompting carried out?

<sup>100</sup> Interview with Veronika Mitro.

Savic's opinion is that that "many women do not know how to construct and direct their life story in a coherent way, therefore they need to be helped in this process of narration. For example if you ask a woman: 'What was your life like in school?' she would respond: 'It was very nice, I was the best pupil' and then she would stop talking. There is another recent example from the interview with a successful Romanian entrepreneur: her story, the way she chosen to tell it, was that of a business woman offering or promoting her tourist services to a client. In a case like this, a question to re-direct her way of narrating would be: 'and could you tell me something about the problems you had in starting your own business and in the work of this new, small company?' Therefore, these questions are sometimes indispensable."<sup>101</sup> Dijanic shares a similar approach and recalls that she would usually intervene in the respondent's narration, prompting her to talk in a certain direction to the extent to which she felt that the events which the woman was telling about needed to be explained further. This would be carried out through active listening and open questions.<sup>102</sup>

On the other hand Radovic, who organized the first methodological seminar in Women Studies in Novi Sad, when Frydlova and Ana Hradilkova taught the research methodology of the project,<sup>103</sup> holds a very categorical stand toward prompting and asking additional questions. She emphasizes the importance of the feminist aspect by arguing that "in this methodology we very much respect the logic of the woman. This means that we do not impose anything; there is no asking too many questions to a respondent." In her view "the Zagreb project and the Vojvodina project are pressuring women's narration. You cannot pose a question to a woman after every two sentences because you simply lose the continuity of her thought; you do not hear what she wants to tell you, you only hear yourself and your own curiosity. I personally do not believe in such approaches." Without specifying what exactly she was referring to in these interviews, Radovic saw their use of method as "mutual

<sup>101</sup> Interview with Svenka Savic.

<sup>102</sup> E-mail interview with Dijana Dijanic.

<sup>103</sup> after which Svenka Savic proceeded independently.

confrontation” as opposed to “understanding that every life is a life by itself and should be respected its inner logic.” She would not interrupt her respondents, as she argues that “attentive listening is extremely important because you have to get into the way of thinking of your respondent, you have to dedicate time to her in order to understand her actions; when a woman talks, it is not so simple, you have to connect things she is talking about because sometimes she can tell you at the very end of her life story something that is relevant for you to understand the very beginning of it.”

This is exactly why Radovic holds that students are not skilled enough to do this kind of interviews. She explains that “women need to know what is active listening; the problem is that students do not know this since it requires a special kind of practice and knowledge. Active listening means that you should not block or hurt a woman in any moment; you should know how to give her support in a way that she keeps opening up to you further. It is a fact that students cannot do this.”<sup>104</sup> Another important methodological feature that Radovic insists upon is that all the items which should follow the interview (transcription, biography, protocol, resume and glossary - as established by the international methodology) ought to be done by the person who conducted the interview. In her words “this is a very important methodological requirement emphasized by Frydlova which many teams did not follow”. When someone else does the transcript and the other following documents of the interview you have conducted, the focus of the interview is lost and the story does not sound convincing.”<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Interview with Nadezda Radovic.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.



## **2.4. RELATIONSHIP AND THE INTERACTION BETWEEN INTERVIEWER AND THE INTERVIEWEE**

To begin elaborating on this very important category, it should be repeated that the feminist methodological base of the project underlines a subject - subject relation where “the narrator is not in a position of an object because she is the co-creator of the research product and [...] [c]ommunication aspires to be as symmetrical as possible. The interviewer is not a neutral observer because she is the recipient of the narrative which, in itself, is to some extent affected by who the listener is.”<sup>106</sup> However, this interaction was illustrated in different ways, on different levels in different individual projects’ experiences.

Svenka Savic’s experience of the interviews with Vojvodina women of different ethnicities notes both the positive and the negative sides of the interview, which for example involves “the familiarity factor” (when the interviewer and the interviewee are related). The constructive part here is that the granddaughter for instance gains a lot from the interview experience by learning from her grandmother things she had never heard about before. Whereas the negative implications caused by this factor are that the narrator usually implies that the interviewee already knows the events, persons, context and memories she is referring to, which could result in insufficiently clear or complete information that then has to be corrected when the interview is being authorized. This means that in the retelling of the family history, there seems to be a set of events that are being retold, and other ones that are not spoken about. For the Vojvodina team, this was also the feature experienced in the interviews with Jewish women. The Jewish women would not tell the stories about the concentration camps and the tortures, *Racija* etc. to the first generation - their daughters - but they would be prepared to face this in an interview with a granddaughter or some other relative. The result would always be a strong emotional reaction from the side of the

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<sup>106</sup> Z. Kiczko (ed.) *Women’s Memory - the Experience of Self-Shaping in Bibliographical Interviews*, Iris, Bratislava 2006, p 208

interviewer, who would be puzzled, confused or affected by the fact that her grandmother, for example, was keeping this side of her life from her or by the fact that this seemed to be a gap in their communication.

Another important factor of these biographical interviews entailed by the interviewer is its experience, perception and the understanding of the aim of the method. Although all of the Women's Studies students (who were doing interviews for the Vojvodina team project and for their own degree) completed the training in the oral history method, some of them would take the advice - "you should avoid asking too many sub-questions and you should let the woman talk freely"- too formally, which then resulted in very short answers which were not further prompted or stimulated. The issue here is that many women do not know how to construct and direct their life story in a coherent way; therefore they need to be helped in this process of narration. Hence, "the practices is to make the first transcript, and after it has been authorized, it is re-examined and possible additional questions regarding what else would be interesting to stimulate a woman to talk about are written in the margins." Accordingly, the interviews with the Ruthenian women would be in Svenka's opinion among the best, precisely because they were conducted by experienced women-journalists from the editorial section of the Ruthenian newspapers. Therefore, it can be said that the variety and the differences in the life stories come not only from the different experiences of the interviewees, but also from the different level of interviewing experience of the interviewer.

Pavla Frydlova supports this argument by sharing her interview practice; to the importance of the interviewer's experience, Frydlova adds the ability to listen and her (the interviewer's) aim and intention during the interview process. In certain cases it was discovered from the transcript and the record that the interviewer was not a patient and attentive listener, interrupting the interviewee's narration by putting the emphasis on her own role. This could not be supported and the person would have to leave the team, since such a

procedure was against the project's methodology. When it comes to the age difference between the interviewee and interviewer, in Frydlova's opinion it is of high importance for the interviewer to be familiar with the historical context of the women's life span where the personal experience of real socialism helps the understanding and trust between the interviewer and interviewee. On the other hand, while in the Vojvodina team the "familiarity factor" in the case of a student-interviewer had its advantages, according to Svenka Savic, in the Czech case this proved to be a shortcoming. First of all, the age difference with the student would make a woman talk to her as if she were her granddaughter, narrating her life as a "once upon a time" kind of story, so that the unequal level of experience would eventually lead to a completely different narrative than the one given to the interviewee who was considered to a certain extent as an equal partner. Moreover, another implication is that the women of the oldest generation would not reveal certain traumatic experience to anyone from the family. In some cases they would rather decide to open up completely to an unknown women-interviewer. In this respect, the ethics, the feeling of responsibility of a researcher (interviewer) becomes crucial, together with the feeling of trust that is to be established during the conversation, which is emphasized in the feminist approach. As Dijana Dijanic, the coordinator of the Croatian team testifies, "the very fact that the woman agreed to tell me her life story, influenced me to a great extent and raised my awareness of the responsibility I have, as I expected that some of the topics which are still 'sensitive' for the woman might come up during the conversation and make her vulnerable." Or, as Frydlova states: "it is very important to listen carefully, to make woman feel that everything she says is equally important to you and that you have to suppress yourself in the interview understanding that it is the woman who I am here for and not vice versa." Similarly, the Slovak team was obviously also guided by this methodological rule since they also consider that "[i]t is imperative for each researcher to be supportive about everything the respondent has to tell, to

encourage her and show selfless interest.”<sup>107</sup>

Nadezda Radovic would agree, since she argues that without the knowledge and the skill of “active listening,” no biographical interview can have proper results. In her view, an oral historian as an interviewer would need to have a great amount of experience in active listening, similar to the one she previously gained in the years long work on the SOS line where she would spend hours listening to various difficult stories and traumatic experiences of women in distress. As far as the generational difference is concerned, Radovic does not feel that the age of the interviewer is crucial for the outcome of the interview; however she does point to the fact that it depends on the generation of the interviewee which topics will be opened. In her experience, the women of the oldest interviewed generations (born in the period between the 1920s-1930s) usually do not open themselves to talk about topics concerning their personal and intimate life, or they do so only partially, whereas the women of younger generations (born in the 1950s) are more inclined to talk about these spheres openly.

Bearing in mind that Radovic has a vast experience in interviewing German and Montenegrin woman, a similar observation of Ljupka Kovacevic, the Montenegro team coordinator, is logical. She stated that in the life stories of the generations of women born before 1930 (who are the only ones represented in this first phase of their project) their intimate life as women in their relationships with their partners was completely missing, hidden. The other important remark made by Kovacevic also regards the implications of the interaction between interviewer and interviewee. It is her impression that the amount and the kind of information gained from the life experience of a woman to a large extent depended on the personal character and interests of the interviewer, since “it was the curiosity and the freedom of the interviewer to look into certain areas of a woman’s life that was decisive.”(Implications of this practice could be considered in the methodological issues.)

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<sup>107</sup> Z.Kiczkova (ed.) *Women’s Memory - The Experience of Self-Shaping in Bibliographical Interviews*, Iris, Bratislava 2006, p 42.

## 2.5. THE SAMPLE OF THE INTERVIEWED WOMEN

Kiczkova, the leader of the Slovak team, explains the basic principle of selecting women for the project: “[w]hen selecting respondents, emphasis is put on a wide social and cultural background and a geographical diversity. Our narrators include women with different levels of education, the most diverse professions, single, married and divorced women, as well as widows.”<sup>108</sup> In the Vojvodina team’s case, the sample was made according to age - according to the decades in whom they were born and which had to be represented throughout the project as defined by the original methodology of the international project.<sup>109</sup> The first group with which the interviews were conducted was the oldest one (women born from 1915 – 1930 and afterwards the women born in the 1940s and 1950s). Veronika Mitro adds that the basic criterion was “women who spent the larger part of their lives in Vojvodina and who were born in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>110</sup> Similarly, the students were also encouraged to find women they wanted to interview (according to their own preferences in profiles) in this age range. Furthermore, the interview guidelines proved to have certain implications on the sample of the interviewed women. The search for these interviewees resulted in the total omission of single women who did not have family because the guidelines contained many questions regarding the family, with the unintended consequence that the ones who did not get married or who were living alone were simply left out. This was corrected in the following project with the handicapped women of Vojvodina who are mainly single, by trying to find and interview the married ones as well.

The sample of women to be covered by the project in each national team would ideally

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<sup>108</sup> See footnote 5.

<sup>109</sup> The International project was interested in documenting the experience of women of three generations (those born from the end of the World War I to those born to 1960), the generations of women who have for the most part of their active lives lived in the times of socialism. However, Vojvodina team made several interviews also with generations born until 1980s.

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Veronika Mitro.

correspond to the one suggested by the three decades division. However, this could not be accomplished equally in all countries, since it depended on different factors. First of all it depended on the funding of the project in each country and the continuity of this financial support which would ensure the survival of the project and its organization. Implications of the funding (or the lack there of) were reflected in the number or variety of generations represented in the publications within the project. The longer the project had financial support, the more interviews that were done comprising different generations of women. In practice, this means that the Czech team, which was the first to begin working, has the largest number of conducted interviews and Montenegro, who joined relatively recently, has published one book of life stories so far of women of the oldest generation (those born in the decade from 1920- 1930).

Although the sample of interviewed women that should ideally be represented in every national case varied because of the abovementioned circumstances, another aspect seemed to be interesting enough to examine; the ways in which different national teams were searching and finding their interviewees was something that also speaks to the sample of woman whose lives were recorded and its possible limitations. The regular practice which obviously many teams shared was to start from the people they knew personally or through someone. That someone would usually be a relative, a neighbour, a grandmother of a friend or a colleague's mother. In any case, the key was to have someone who already knew the person and her life. Additionally, this, in most cases meant that someone (or the interviewee herself) thought the woman's life story was interesting and not only that, but they would probably also know that the woman was able to articulate her life story, which is an important factor. Frydlova explains how in the first, "pilot" phase of the project, the Czech team conducted around 30 interviews with their acquaintances or neighbours and it simply went from there by the "snow ball effect." One person would recommend the next interviewee and usually it was the best

way to find them. Dijanic confirms that the Croatian team also followed the methodological consensus and the given generational structure of the international project, as well as the recommendation that the sample of women was to be made in such a way so that all the social strata are represented. She testifies about the same experience as P. Frydlova stating that “we began with the women we knew and afterwards, by the ‘snow-ball method’ we found the others.”<sup>111</sup> The selection of respondents therefore was based on personal recommendations because the most essential element of the feminist approach and oral history in general is the principle of trust.<sup>112</sup>

The balancing of the represented profiles also had to take place when, according to P. Frydlova’s experience, the team would conclude that there were too many interviewed women-intellectuals, after which they would decide to focus more on searching for women who stayed in the village. However, the sample of the first group of the interviewed women represented in the first publications of the Czech team provoked certain discontent and suffered critiques from the circles of the women -members of the former Women’s Socialist Union who argued that the interviews showed the lives only of those women who were against the socialist regime, who were dissidents and suggested that those who were members of the Communist Party and who were active in the Communist Union should also be found. Thus, in the following phase the Czech team took this into consideration and expanded its interviewees with the list of members obtained from the Women’s Socialist Union. In Frydlova’s view, although many of them cancelled their interviews (about the reasons see the following subchapter 3.5), those who went through with it resulted in great life stories. The strategy of the German team who was searching for a number of their interviewees in the nursing homes, proved to be unsuitable as the sample of women the Czech team had in mind.

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<sup>111</sup> Interview with Dijana Dijanic.

<sup>112</sup> Z.Kiczkova (ed.) *Women’s Memory - The Experience of Self-Shaping in Bibliographical Interviews*, Iris, Bratislava 2006, p 24 “Trust is manifested already at the stage of respondents selection. That is why our work is mostly based on personal recommendations without which it is very difficult to gain the respondents trust”.

In P. Frydlova's opinion, "these women would talk mostly about their present everyday life, what they saw on TV, what the nurse said or the neighbor did [...],"<sup>113</sup> so they gave up on this type of interviews.

The team led by Nadezda Radovic initially decided to cover four groups of women of different generations: women from the Faculty of Philosophy (since that was the core of the opposition in Belgrade), the women they least knew about (Roma women, lesbians and German women), those who had typically female professions (hairdressers, cosmeticians, tailors etc) and the last group was to be the feminists who they ended up not interviewing because "the strength of the team was exhausted and only the women who worked from pure enthusiasm remained."<sup>114</sup> Since the team concluded that they had the least knowledge about German women, the sample for the first book of their life stories comprised German women who did not have the experience of the concentration camps since they married "the enemy," "the victors" who made it possible for them to stay and live in Serbia. For the second edition of "the Danube basin women" they traced German women who had experience of the camps and even those who had been raped there, which of course resulted in completely different narratives within the same ethnic group.

Ljupka Kovacevic explains that the sample of the women represented in the publication from the "pilot" phase of the Montenegrin project comprised only women from the oldest generation born before the 1930s of which none were socially engaged but rather "ordinary" woman who agreed to have the interview. The number of conducted interviews was in Kovacevic's words very small; nevertheless, all the women were of different education. Some of them finished only Elementary school; some went to the Girl's High School (Zenska gimnazija) or learned a craft. There were not many published interviews because a great number of interviews were not authorized. Women would simply change their

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<sup>113</sup> interview with Pavla Frydlova.

<sup>114</sup> Interview with Nadezda Radovic.



mind and refuse permission to publish after all the work had been done. This was a big problem for the Montenegro team. To my question what in her opinion influenced their decision to publish or not to publish their interview, Kovacevic speculated that it was the social status of the woman which influenced her decision. “It was much harder for women who were in a certain way dominant in their community, who gave more importance to their activity to agree to publication because they were scaling the impression, the image that the interview might create.”<sup>115</sup>

The Montenegro team was not the only one to face this **problem of authorization**. It is a common fact among most of the teams (with the exception of the Slovak team)<sup>116</sup> that the data bases comprise many more interviews than are published. This topic is to a certain extent related to my question about whether there were some women whose life story they really wanted but did not succeed in getting. It was more or less the experience shared among all of the coordinators with the exception of Dijanic from the Croatian team. Kiczkova argues that [...] their surprise, or even reluctance, is understandable, particularly if we take into consideration that many of them speak to somebody about their life in such compact and extensive manner for the very first time, and that some of the experiences they have not shared with anybody so far.”<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, Kiczkova gives the example of a woman who refused to do the interview because she did not want to go through the painful memories again (e.g. the memories of war in which she lost her family).<sup>118</sup> Some of the most interesting life stories they had to wait for a couple of years. Frydlova gave the example of the mother of her colleague whose story she really wanted to record and it took the woman three years to change her mind and give the interview. She adds that “many interesting life stories you learn

<sup>115</sup> Interview with Ljupka Kovacevic.

<sup>116</sup> Z. Kiczkova (ed.) *Women's Memory - The Experience of Self-Shaping in Bibliographical Interviews*, Iris, Bratislava 2006, p 43: “we had no problems whatsoever with authorizing of the recording which was done orally by the respondent at the end of the interview.”

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, p 42.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

about can not be recorded simply because some women do not know how to tell their life story or they basically do not want to tell it.”<sup>119</sup>

Savic said that there are about 20 interviews in the data bases of Women Studies in Novi Sad, where the women at the end did not give authorization just like in the Montenegrin case. She explained how in her view there are three categories of these cases: First are the women who accepted to give the interview but did not give permission for publication, the second are the women whose life stories are published under a pseudonym and the third group would be the women who did not want to share their life story at all. Moreover, Savic recalled two examples when women agreed to give the interview, however some technical problems occurred (the interviewer was eventually very late or did not show up), so in Savic’s words “they felt in a way betrayed and when we tried to correct our mistake, they would give up, they would simply close themselves.”<sup>120</sup>. One of these women is of Jewish and the other of Croatian origin, hence both of them belong to the “vulnerable” nationalities who are minorities in Vojvodina and this in Savic’s opinion might have influenced their indecision about speaking. The reason why some women are delaying, stalling is usually because they are aware that the publication of their life story might have certain implications. This refers mostly to the women of academia whose promised authorization (at the moment of their interview) Savic had to wait for some time. Her experience is that they would change their minds several times while they were considering the possible consequences. Similarly to Kovacevic’s speculations on the reasons why women decide not to authorize their story, Savic noted that “different women are vain in different ways; Women who have academic careers are the ones who make the most changes after the interview has been transcribed.”<sup>121</sup> Although she could not conclude that it was a general rule, the things women mostly tended to change in their narratives were the things related to their husbands and his family. This left

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<sup>119</sup> Interview with Pavla Frydlova.

<sup>120</sup> Interview with Svenka Savic.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

the impression that “they still feel the authority of the husband or his family and are cautious about something being held against them after the interview had been published.” The same could be said for any other male figure with the power-position in their lives (such as theater directors which they would otherwise critique, but would not name them or use the exact title).

The experience of Radovic shows a different aspect of the same issue. Although some women would become indecisive about publishing (saying “I cannot do this to my husband”),<sup>122</sup> it is the husbands and sons who would pressure the women to change or erase certain parts regarding the family or personal life. Otherwise, “women never wanted to erase anything, with the exception of the Montenegrin woman who asked for omitting the parts about her sick child.”<sup>123</sup>

It is worth mentioning, as Frydlova previously pointed out, that the relation between the ability to articulate a life story and the quantity or quality of the lived experiences is not always proportional. “Not all the women are great narrators as all Roma women are.”<sup>124</sup> The experience of the Slovak team showed the same. As Botikova noted, “the women we addressed were not ‘storytellers’ in the folkloric sense of the word. On the other hand, some of the stories were either perfectly polished (because they were repeatedly told on various family and social occasions) or excessively drilled (as they were frequently used in professional CVs).”<sup>125</sup> This is precisely something to bear in mind when we are reflecting upon who are the women we are reading about, how the sample that we get our knowledge from is created, what were its shortcomings and what are the limitations in getting the most “interesting” and the most “representative” life stories from the socialist time.

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<sup>122</sup> Interview with Nadezda Radovic.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Interview with Svenka Savic.

<sup>125</sup> See footnote 37.

## 2.6. SENSITIVE TOPICS – FAVOURITE TOPICS OF THE INTERVIEWED WOMEN

In Svenka Savic's experience of the interviews with Vojvodina women of different ethnicities, topics about which a woman does not want to talk about openly or reveal her personal opinion to a large extent depended on the educational level and the way she was brought up. For example, while the highly educated women, University professors etc, would almost never talk about their marriage or their relationship with their husband, the illiterate and Roma women (to whom oral history is the only way of telling their life stories publicly) were very open about these questions and often talked about the infidelity of their husbands, of the ways they had left them and similar stories. Radovic has different experience with the highly educated women. In her interview with Vesna Pesic, a prominent Serbian sociologist and politician, the interviewee openly talked about love, her relationships, affairs and similar personal topics. On the other hand, it can be argued that the knowledge gained from the information of the interview conducted by the students of Women's Studies in Novi Sad was sometimes limited regarding these sensitive topics due to the disinclination of the students (who would for example interview their grandmothers), to ask questions related to infidelity, contraception etc. because they did not feel comfortable with it and they did not observe the task from a feminist point of view.

Another ambiguous topic was the political situation in Yugoslavia. Women of Vojvodina would openly talk about the remote past, like WWII, the concentration camps, the *Chetniks*,<sup>126</sup> the Partisans, their relationships with the Germans, but would be reluctant to speak about the recent war in the 1990s (an example are the Croatian women). When it comes to a younger generation of women from a national minority group, there were cases when the question of religion could be interpreted as a sensitive one. Savic recalls an example from a

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<sup>126</sup> Chetniks (Serb.: Četnici) were the Serbian nationalist and royalist paramilitary guerrilla force that was formed during World War II to resist the Axis invaders and Croatian collaborators but that primarily fought for restoration of monarchism in occupied Yugoslavia and also fought a civil war against the Yugoslav communist guerrillas, the Partisans.

recent interview with a Romanian woman entrepreneur when she avoided a direct answer to Savic's comment that she was not mentioning religion at all, by asking in return: "And is it at all important"? This is to say that anything that could have repercussions to the present life of a woman was most likely to be kept out of her narrative.<sup>127</sup> However, a woman can consider religion as a sensitive topic even if there are no repercussions on her life, or she can simply feel that her confession belongs to a very private area about which she has the right not to share. Radovic has a different impression. She feels that today there are no more barriers or self censure in the narratives of her interviewees and that "they have said all that they wanted to say because there was no more fear of the repression or of the possible consequences. That was all in the past." (Nadezda recalls one interview when a German woman, a teacher from Vojvodina told her that before she could never say that she had been in the concentration camp, and afterwards when she wanted to buy land to build a house on it, it was made impossible in a very dodgy way. She knew that it was because she was German; however she never used this argument in front of the authorities, whereas years after (in the 1990s), she was glad that she could openly talk about it in an interview. One woman even named some people, (perpetrators who were living in the same town) and was even ready to say their names on TV. In her opinion, women are very good in feeling where the boundaries of the political freedoms are and they would never adventurously cross these borders unless there were no consequences.

Regarding favorite topics, most of my interviewees named children as the common favorite topic (with the exception given by Radovic when a child is ill and the woman prefers that this stays unpublished, or with the older generations of women who tended to say half-truths about their children in the way they wanted to represent them in public) and family in general (although Frydlova limits this topic of family in the Czech women's interviews to the

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<sup>127</sup> Svenka Savic explains that the way they know this is because the woman who wanted to tell the truth about something that could entail - consequences usually asked for her story to be published under pseudonym and without her picture.

children, thus not necessarily including the husband who sometimes had more of a “side” role in the narrative). Women interviewed by Radovic remembered their childhood and the times when they got married vividly and talked about it openly. The Montenegrin women of the oldest generation would not speak openly about their relationship with their husband nor would they mention any part of their intimate life, but would gladly speak about their relationships with other people, neighbors and family in general, and also would, in certain cases, underline the support in education which they got from their fathers. At the same time, for the Czech women, divorces were the most sensitive topic they would be reluctant to talk about while both the war and the after-war generation gave great importance to education and emancipation. The generation born in the 1920s could not finish their education because WWII started so all the high educational institutions were closed for six years. They regretted this for the rest of their lives so they urged their daughters to have good education in order to be independent.

Furthermore, many of the interviews in all national cases showed that work for a woman in socialist times was an important aspect of life about which they gladly talked about as a source of emancipation, security and self-confidence. From Frydlova’s recollections, an interesting group of cases can be singled out from the Czech team. Those were the women who were active in the former Women’s Socialist Union and who by and large cancelled their interviews when they would find out that they were not to speak about the work of the Union, but about their lives. This could be explained by the fact that at the time, this Union as a society was the only place where women could go out and gather, socialize, drink coffee and sew (since they had sewing machines which the Party provided them with). Frydlova quoted one of her favorite sentences from these interviews which illustrated the spirit of the time and the everyday life of women: “... men had bars and women had the Socialist Union.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Interview with Ljupka Kovacevic.

## 2.7. CONCLUSIONS

Having presented many aspects of and opinions about the methodology of the international project, it can be argued that in spite of its originally shared aims and guidelines, understanding and implementing it in individual projects did not always follow the uniform rules. Kovacevic's answer to my question regarding the methodology speaks to these nuances: "Our methodology was a kind of mixture; something between Pavla Frydlova and Svenka Savic."<sup>129</sup>

But let us not get too deep into the individual specificities and differences, as those have been addressed in the previous pages. What does the methodological debate, the "personalized" aims and adapted question sets of individual teams, different choices and attitudes about who can interview and what skills are required, actually mean for the available interviews? First of all, we need to acknowledge the very fact that they do mean something; that they speak to the interviews and through the interviews. What does this mean in return? It means and points to the fact that the interviews are not immune to all of the abovementioned issues; they are rather mirroring them and this is something to bear in mind when we assess them. Second of all, in order to turn to the establishing of the biases and limitations created by these issues, we need to understand the end product of a biographical interview. If we agree that, given the context of the project, the end product is a conversational narrative<sup>130</sup> (containing system of structures), then the logical step forward is to acknowledge that what we end up with holding in our hands as readers is basically a *text*.

Now, in order to make basis for the further examination in the chapter 3 of what does this text mean or communicate to the public as a created body of knowledge, we first have to define the nature of these texts delineating their limitations. This is a indeed a complex task;

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<sup>129</sup> Iwith Ljupka Kovacevic.

<sup>130</sup> G.N. Gordon, *The Languages of Communication: a logical and Psychological Examination*, 1969; E. Rumics "Oral History: Defining the Term", 1966, as quoted in J.R. Grele "Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical problems of Oral History" in R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds.) *The Oral History Reader*, London, Routledge, p 44, 1991.

however I believe that it can be made simpler and clearer if we have in mind two things: the theoretical premises of memory and feminist practice of oral history (given in chapter 1-subchapter 2); and second, the question: what is invisible, but inbuilt (in the interview text)? If we have these two starting points, then the list of limitations to be taken into consideration while approaching a conversational narrative is not so long. To assess them, we need to ask ourselves: **Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect?**<sup>131</sup> The first question: Who? - brings us to the first limitation – who are the persons to be interviewed is determined by the sample. The very fact that my interviewees shared experiences about how they found the women they interviewed how many of them they wanted to interview but could not get the story, along with the issue of authorization, gives a good insight into this limitation. What? - is the question of memory. However, what we need to be aware of is, once more, that memory is a fluid category which is constructed. Therefore, it is not a “raw” experience that the interviewer gets because there is no “raw” experience, as “it is not subjects who *have* experience, but it is the subjects who *are constituted through* experience”<sup>132</sup> and it is the meaning *behind* this representation of the past that we should be interested in more than in the representation itself.<sup>133</sup> The limitation and the bias of the question: in which channel? - of course has to do with the web that has already been mentioned and that has to be taken into account – who is speaking, what is their social, personal or political agenda, gender, language, race and class. Furthermore, knowing the theoretical premises of the feminist oral history, we know that the interaction between the interviewee and interviewer is emphasized to the extent of being a holistic, collaborative and joint process answers the question to whom? – the researcher’s persona who also brings in her cultural context, experience and politics. Additionally, the interviewer is still the one who asks the questions, and the range of

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<sup>131</sup> Quotation used by H.D. Lasswell in “The structure and function of communication in society”, 1948, used in Oral History course additional materials by prof. Andrea Peto.

<sup>132</sup> See footnote 38.

<sup>133</sup> See footnote 35, 52.



questions, the ways of probing and listening again depend on age, skill, and personal aims and affinities. This brings us to the end of the list of biases and limitations that are inherent in a text of a conversational narrative. The last aspect to bear in mind is: with what effect? The range of effects include both the researcher and the respondent in their collaborative process of creating a testimony, a new experience that influences both of them through the circular process of producing knowledge. However, the knowledge that has been produced continues its path to the broader public it aimed to reach. This “after life” of a life story, a representation of the memory of the past is what will be looked at in the last chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### ***3.1. PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE PROJECT, ITS OUTCOMES AND ORAL HISTORY AS A METHOD (ADVANTAGES/DISADVANTAGES); ISSUE OF THE ARCHIVES (ACCESIBILITY OF THE DOCUMENTATION)***

What creates differences among national teams in terms of achievements, institutional support and publicity mainly depends on how long a team has been involved in the project, how long it received financial support and thus succeeded in developing its network and publishing materials. Moreover, other important factors include the professional position of the the members working on the project (personal connections, memberships in different boards) and the knowledge and support oral history as a method has in a particular society with emphasis on its gender politics and the amount of attention women's lives receive in the public sphere.

However, it is expected that all of the coordinators praise the method as the best one for getting the details and particular information on how women lived, how they managed in their everyday life, how some historical events influenced them and how they felt. In their views, oral history is an important method for the history of everyday life. However, for them, the shortcomings of the method were connected mostly with the resources which then entail many other problems, such as the organization of the archives and reliance mostly on the enthusiasm of the collaborators who are mainly unpaid and work on the project for their own sake. Frydlova stated that this was the problem of comparing the research from the participating countries, which was also the goal of the project. Firstly the issue of language made interpretations extremely difficult, and secondly, it proved to be exhausting since none of the collaborators were dedicated only to the project, and had other full-time jobs. Language and the transcribing rules was an issue raised by Savic who stressed that this was only partially solved, in spite of the fact that it was discussed at length. This issue was present in

cases of transcription of interviews done in a dialect (Croatian women)<sup>134</sup> or when women spoke in their mother tongue (Roma women). Also, in the case of unfinished sentences, or where something was left out, it would not be hard to complete a sentence of an educated woman, but in the case of Roma women, the interviews were firstly adapted in the Roma dialect which the interviewers spoke and then the conversational sentence had to be transformed into the textual sentence in both Serbian and English.

Nevertheless, Savic is full of praise for the method which she is propagating and that she has been employing for years. Savic considers it indispensable and necessary for the study of women. The method of oral history is in her words the one which could show us what to research further and what to look for when it comes to women. This goes especially for the Roma woman in this decade of Roma where these studies create a relevant source material for looking into different issues of Roma in the society today. Savic recently began a project about the education of the Roma people, where she uses oral history method in interviewing young Roma girls, however not about their lives, but on the topic of education. The only thing that could be done in the future, in Savic's opinion, is to systematize different uses of oral history focusing on a specific topic, parts of life or only certain events.

Radovic thinks similarly of the method and its uses, emphasizing that with the published stories women are entering the public discourse and taboos are being dismantled, so they could have the impression that they are appreciated, that someone cares and that they are encouraged to disclose their painful memories. Such personal narratives as representations of the past offer the dimension of the feelings people had during some major historical events. From them, it can be seen how the great conferences and big decisions on the national level were reflected in ordinary people's lives. The personal benefit she sees from her experience of

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<sup>134</sup> Interview with Svenka Savic, Novi Sad, April 2010: Croatian women who read the book remarked that it was not Croatian language that the women in the book spoke in. The point in this case was that the Croatian in Croatia and Croatian language in Vojvodina are different, as Croatian women in Vojvodina have lexical mixtures.

conducting these interviews is that the interactions, empathy and participation of the interviewer in the narrative enrich its perception and understanding. An interviewer can never remain untouched and unchanged by the interview. For her, the greatest prize is the woman's acknowledgement that the telling of her life story made her feel that her life had some sense, meaning and that her experience is validated.

Dijanica adds that the experience of oral history meant a great deal to her, particularly in the sense of transfer of women's experience and team work. Frydlova sees the success of the Czech team in publishing their books in a couple of thousands of copies which make the lives of these women visible and which will hopefully influence a change in the stereotypical way of writing history. In Frydlova's opinion, similarly to the other coordinators, what the method of oral history can provide are details of their everyday life, as well as how they thought and what was important to them. Kovacevic from the Montenegro team experienced many difficulties in the pilot stage of their project. The women who were trained in the seminars to use the method would eventually give up working in the project. The same case was with the coordinator of the project who they ended up not finding, since the coordinators kept changing due to different circumstances and it was difficult to find someone who would be in charge of the project only. However, she finds the method extremely useful for finding out about the way of life of the women, but she adds that for someone who would want to have the whole picture of the time, it cannot be enough as no generalizations of these individual experiences can be made.

One of the frequently stressed problems within the project was the issue of transcribing and archiving the material. In Frydlova's words, it took two years for all the national teams to come up with an effective way to mark the key words of each interview which would label the major topic that a woman talked about. Moreover, the prerequisite of the international project was to become a database for the materials of the national teams. The

role of an extensive archive was one of the most important aims. At the moment, some of the most relevant interviews and transcripts (together with protocol, biography and resume) made by the national teams are in the Gender Studies department in Prague, but most of the teams save the materials in their own quarters due to technical circumstances. The Croatian team is not connected with the national archive, as well as the most of the other individual teams. Better archiving requires better equipment and finances. For Frydlova, the digitalizing of the materials is something that needs to be done in the near future. However, the availability of the materials is connected with many ethical issues. Since the first, original versions are the ones which have been subsequently corrected and censored by the narrator, they cannot in Frydlova's view be accessible. She allows researchers to use some of the original sources but only for the additional material for a thesis or a similar project, but the entire documentation cannot be made public nor used as a base for another big project. The ethical dilemmas include the fact that many women told things they would never want to be published, so it is questionable whether some materials can be made public even after their death. In the meantime, the issue of an all encompassing archive is persisting, as Frydlova tries to find space and resources for gathering and preserving all the materials. The Montenegro team, as I have learned, saved their transcripts and additional materials in hard copies. However the digitalized versions of the interviews were saved in floppy discs, which are hardly reliable and are not in use any more. Savic has a different way of archiving, which was one of the primary reasons she had separated from the International project. The materials of the Vojvodina team are in the Women Studies center in Novi Sad, however, when ever they had to move, these documents suffered the risk of getting lost easily.

### **3.2. REACTIONS TO PUBLISHED MATERIALS (AND THEIR USE SO FAR)**

Along with the books, the Czech team made a documentary by the name *War in Women's Memory* – which was realized in cooperation of Gender Studies, o.p.s. and Czech Television and had a premier on May 2005 on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the World War II at CT 2 program. The movie was also subtitled in English. Additionally, in 2006 the Czech Radio 6 broadcast a cycle of destinies of German female antifascists in Czechoslovakia by the name *Žily tady s námi* (They Lived Here with Us). The cycle was also published as a CD. Moreover, the reactions of women who have read the books express their gratitude by e-mails in feeling that they are not alone in some experiences or that they felt encouraged to take certain risks in their lives toward independence.

In Serbia, the interviews with Danube Basin German women were used for a radio drama by a director, Melita Kojic, from the Drama Academy in Belgrade and were broadcast several times on Radio Belgrade. The radio drama has also been published in form of a CD. In Radovic's words, institutions did not show much interest in the project; however, she made sure that every library and department of Philosophy faculty got a copy of the book.

The Montenegro team also did not have much success to find interested sponsors to continue the project, so they stopped at the first group of published interviews. According to Kovacevic, they got involved with the project too late and it was also too late to apply for the funding from abroad.

In the case of Vojvodina project, the Ministry of Culture supported the promoting of the project with the idea of making banners, billboards, jingles and TV commercials. This however, still has not been carried out, but the Ministry has been partially supporting the project in previous years. When it comes to the reactions, in Savic's words, people who have read the books were enthusiastic about them and almost all of the copies are sold out. The plan of the Vojvodina team is to create a joint archive with the Croatians and to make some of

the materials accessible to the University of Novi Sad and Belgrade. Many seminar works had been done based on the interview materials, especially with the topics on the Roma women. Reaction in Croatia was divided- both positive and negative. The problem in Dijanic's words was with those who could not accept the oral history method and its feminist approach. It was the 'feminist' part that was in her view a thorn in the eye. Nevertheless, some of the interviews were used in the Faculty of Philosophy and the Croatian Studies in Zagreb at the department of history as additional literature for those dealing with the gender aspect in history.

### ***3.3. OUTCOMES: BOOK IN HAND – CHOICES AND STRUCTURE OF PUBLISHED RESEARCH AND THE POSSIBLE IMPLICATION AS A “BODY OF KNOWLEDGE” FOR BOTH THE ACADEMIC AND BROADER PUBLIC***

In order to proceed to the question of the body of knowledge gained from the feminist practice of oral history, we should return to the statement by Jiřina Šiklová that “the aims of the project are not theoretical, but practical, [...] they should serve ‘the public enlightenment’, broad public and civic society.”<sup>135</sup> Thus, what is important from the start of this thesis is exactly the specific, feminist public and political mission of the project. In order to examine how the publications within the project<sup>136</sup> see this mission and deal with it, they can be analyzed through the way they address the public and the choices they make while doing so. This should provide bases for my conclusions on how these choices shape the body of knowledge they have produced, what it means to their audience and how it speaks to the relationship between history and memory.

The publications that are a result of the project are many, since they comprise the works of many national teams. Moreover, these are not only books of interviews, but also

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<sup>135</sup> See footnote 10.

<sup>136</sup> And outside of the project, having in mind that publications to be looked at are also from the Vojvodina's independent project.

documentaries<sup>137</sup> about women, and radio processing of some of the interviews.<sup>138</sup> However, due to the limitations<sup>139</sup> of this research, I will here access those publications which were available to me during its course, or the ones I became familiar with through the interviews with their editors or via what was published about them. I will therefore discuss two publications of the Serbian team by Nadezda Radovic, four publications of Women's Studies in Novi Sad, and a publication of the Slovak team edited by Zuzana Kiczko. I will also account for the Czech team and Croatian team's choices in presenting their research to the extent it was communicated by their coordinators.

I will begin with the Vojvodina team whose publications I got from Svenka Savic personally, which are also available at the library at the Central European University, even though most of them cannot be found in the bookstores in Serbia any more.<sup>140</sup> The book edited by Zuzana Kiczko can be found there as well. I was able to browse the books of the Czech team during my visit to the Gender Studies department. Unfortunately, I could not read the interviews as I do not speak Czech. Two publications of Nadezda Radovic were loaned to me by the municipality Museum of Vrbas (a town in Vojvodina where the German population prevalently lived until the end of WWII). The search for the copy of the Croatian's team publication proved to be long and unsuccessful; however I succeeded in copying a "Dictionary of Women's Biographies in Socialism" (which is published as an additional part to the interviews) during my short visit to the Gender Studies department in Prague.

<sup>137</sup> *Pines and Firs* - Women's Memories of the Life in Socialism (Borovi i jele - Sjećanje žena na život u socijalizmu) - video-documentary film, 58 minutes, Zagreb, 2002 .

*War in Women's Memory* - a documentary film realized in cooperation of Gender Studies, o.p.s. and Czech Television (Česká televize), 57 minutes, premiere on 22 May 2005 at ČT 2 program.

; *Grenzenlos engagiert* (To Get Engaged without Borders) - a German documentary film portraying five German and Polish women of three generations, 60 minutes, OWEN, Berlin 2005.

<sup>138</sup> Radio processing on the interview with German women from the Danubian Basin: *Danubian Basin German Women*, 66 minutes, published also on CD, Belgrade 2002 ( published on the project's website <http://www.womensmemory.net/english/publications.asp>).

<sup>139</sup> Limitations were the language (most of the publications are not translated in English, and I could not assess them in their original), the distribution of the books (one publication could not be found even after month and a half of ordering it through ILL) and shortness of the research period.

<sup>140</sup> In our interview, Svenka Savic pointed to the fact that the first editions of every publication of Life Stories of Women in Vojvodina from different ethnic groups ( 20 books in all, each printed in 1000 copies) were sold out, Personal interview with Svenka Savic, Novi Sad, April 2010.



All the books of interviews of Women's Studies are published by Women's Studies and Research "Mileva Maric Einstein" and Futura Publications in Novi Sad and follow more or less the same structure. The structure, again, should point to the choices that are made in obtaining the data (oral history method) according to the goals<sup>141</sup> previously formulated (see chapter 2, subchapter 2.3); as well as to the choices concerning presentation of the research to the targeted audiences (academic and non-academic). Having this in mind, we can proceed in assessing the structure of these publications.

The book begins with acknowledgements to the interviewees, student researchers who worked on the project, translators, lector, and other collaborators as well as to the fund (sponsor) who made the project possible. The preface of the publications contains the basic information about the Women's Studies and Research Center in Novi Sad as an alternative, interdisciplinary program of higher education. The biographical method of oral history (the term 'feminist' is not mentioned) in documenting the lives of women in Vojvodina is described at the beginning and is preceded by the background story of how the project began. The method is further elaborated with the information about the semi-structured interview and the details about the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the interviewee (who usually knew each other as the researcher could choose who she would like to interview). A thorough description<sup>142</sup> of the phases of research follow, underpinned by quoted

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<sup>141</sup> S.Savic (ed), *A sto cu ti ja jedna pricati*, Futura publikacije, Novi Sad 2008. The goals of Vojvodina team were two folded: by orienting itself to the women of different ethnic groups, it was trying to find answers to how the multiethnic and multicultural community developed in Vojvodina and what was the women's contribution in this ongoing process; the second aim was affirmation of the oral history method in order to make it available to a wide circle of those who wanted to use it for making the stories available to public, and to archive them in a digital form for the research in the future. However it is important to account for the elaboration of this goal as stated in the publication from 2001: "Researchers from various disciplines have their focus in the general understanding of what can be the problem of biographies: how human nature is formed. [...] thus attention is paid to the everyday life of individuals and this can be done only if we consciously collect materials for the future analysis."

<sup>142</sup> S.Savic (ed.) *Vojvodjanke (1917-1931): Zivotne price (Women of Vojvodina: Life Stories)*, Futura publikacije, Novi Sad 2001, pp10-14 The phases are described from the training of the interviewees, their first contact with the interviewee, establishing the relationship of trust, then taping of the interview, transcribing by the interviewer (with description of the rules established according to the aim of the project, with its focus on the content analysis and not on the "conversational gestures or lexis, nature of morphology, or accent),<sup>142</sup> editing of the text (done by the same person – interviewer) according to a list of rules that concern the choices made in the

examples when certain problems occurred in some of the phases, critically assessing the method and the skill of the interviewer or the nature of the interaction itself. Importantly, the section on method includes the account of the difficulties in its application and it also creates a necessary awareness of the potential audience about the nature of the relationship of the interview participants by explaining that the dialogue is conditioned by the topics the researcher is interested in, also by the age difference, time and the place, giving the audience the insight into the context which should be kept in mind during the reading “ since they to a great extent influence the selection of the events to be narrated.”<sup>143</sup> Moreover, the publication makes sure that the existence of genres in which the women speak, as well as the emphasis on the silences (the things she does not say), are accounted for. In larger publications that comprise life stories of women from different nationalities, extensive appendices give information about basic instructions for conducting a biographical interview, conversation scheme, ethical codex of the interview, along with the rules of documenting the material. The corpus of the data in a publication is given by a table which summarizes decades, place of birth, marital status, educational level and profession. In some cases a photo of the woman is included in the interview (according to her preferences), although the interview can be published under a pseudonym.

The consideration of the historical context is given through copies of original documents related to the crucial events in Yugoslavia in some cases followed also by the textual overview of the historical context. In the publications about certain minority groups, instead of this historical context, a segment is dedicated to the recommendations of further readings that explain historical circumstances of the particular minority. In the case of Roma

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presentation of the language, attitude toward dialect, language choice of the woman (the women could choose to speak in their mother tongue or in Serbian), handing in the edited text to the interviewee for possible comments and correction until the gaining of the approval. Three additional documents are made that conclude the research: protocol (details about the relationship of the participants); biogram (chronological list of events-turning points in the life of the woman from her birth until the interview, and the summary (explanations about the focus of interest of the interviewer; i.e. - education, motherhood, working experience etc.).

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, p9.

women, a broad overview of the already existing literature is given together with the data from the research project on Roma<sup>144</sup> women by Roma students from Women's Studies Novi Sad. The data from Eastern Europe are included as well. Publications end by not forgetting to introduce us to the researchers (via photo) on the project with their short biographies, enabling the understanding of the importance of their shear in what a reader assesses.

Although they started out together in the beginning of joining the International project, trained in the same methodology by Pavla Frydlova, the project of Nadezda Radovic differs from that of Svenka Savic to a great extent. Publications of life stories of *The Danube basin German women* in two volumes represent memories of these women gained through her practice of feminist oral history method. However, here the method is implicit, the questions are not published, so the narrative looks uninterrupted, and the voice of the interviewer is not heard. Every interview resembles a short story preceded by description of the place and atmosphere where it took place, as well as Radovic's impressions of the woman and the way she spoke of her life. The book contains many pictures of the interviewees with their families and throughout their life course. Every story has a title which is actually a quoted sentence of the woman from the interview.<sup>145</sup> The story is concluded with: "noted by Nadezda Cetkovic (now Radovic) or Dobrila Sindjelic- Ibrajter," who was the co-author of the publication.

The preface contains a historical account about Germans in Yugoslavia and their destiny, given in personal voice, as well as Radovic's explanation of her personal interest, connected with the project Women's Memory, which was dismantling taboos of hidden pages of women's lives, and German women were the ones she knew the least about. The second edition, *The Danube basin German women II*, contains more interviews and the preface mentions that the Women's Memory project methodology has been used in the interviews,

<sup>144</sup> S. Savic (ed), *Romkinje 2* (Romani Women 2), Futura publikacije, Novi Sad, 2007

<sup>145</sup> For example: The Story of Roza Ljilak, "Here in Kikinda everybody will tell you that I am a German woman, or He Promised my Father that he would take care of Me". in *Danube basin German women II*, Medijska knjizara Krug, Beograd 2000, p 67, 88.

mentioning trust, self-censorship, subjective truth and the support to another woman to talk about difficult experiences from a personal perspective. This preface emphasizes the “fluid” non-measurable results of Women’s Memory Project, seen through the experience of her colleagues as the aim to give a woman the chance to go through her life course with another woman, in order to validate her life experience and to give her support in telling her painful experiences.<sup>146</sup> This edition finishes with the set of copies of documents from the post WWII time illustrating decisions and laws which affected German population in Vojvodina. This set of pages is named “Pages for reflecting.”<sup>147</sup> The book has been translated into German by Sudostdeutsches Kulturwerk Institute from Munich.

Czech team made the same choice in their publications and the questions were omitted, because the aim was to publish for a broad, non-academic audience, differently from the Slovak and the Croat team.<sup>148</sup> The Slovak team’s publication is an elaborate presentation of the Woman’s Memory project with the eight sections dedicated to every aspect of the project (origin, international, feminist and political character of the project, its aims, method, and results), execution of the interviews including selection of respondents, stages of the interviews, and the particular experience of the Slovak team. The publication includes a thorough evaluation of the two narrative interviews with theoretical bases and interpretative analyses and concludes with the researcher’s self-reflections on the interview experience. A similar approach has been taken by the Croat team, however in a more succinct form. They also acknowledged the specificities of the feminist approach giving insight into the main points of methodological consensus together with their own interview guidelines. Importantly, the Croat team acknowledged that in order to understand the statements made by the women readers should keep in mind the historical notes that accompany the interview which place the

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<sup>146</sup> N. Radovic and Dobrila Sindjelic- Ibrajter, *The Danube basin German women II*, Medijska knjizara Krug, Beograd 2000, p 5, 6.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid

<sup>148</sup> Personal interview with Pavla Frydlova, Prague, April 2010

women's stories into a social history framework. They explained this methodological step of selecting the secondary literature and the notes because "there is no unique set of instruments that exist in our region for the time of socialism by which historical facts and processes can be interpreted [...] even the memories of the interviewees reflect these problems."<sup>149</sup> The book ends with Appendices which encompasses texts on reproductive rights, the political, economic and educational participation of women in socialist society, and a Storybook of cultural events and the achievements in the area of science.<sup>150</sup>

Thus, it is especially clear in this case how the choice of the representation of the research as the body of knowledge points to their view on the partiality of the material and hence the relationship between an oral history account and broader historical frame. To connect with the beginning of this chapter, the purpose of examining the different choices that the teams make in publishing their research was to show how this is closely connected with their project's mission and the ways teams addressed it. It is clear that in cases of Vojvodina, Croatia and Slovakia, the targeting of both academic and non academic audience made it possible for the readers to be aware of the biases inherent in every narrative. The Slovak and the Croatian team gave full accounts on the particular feminist practice of oral history, subjectivity of both sides and construction of memory through the channels of bias delineated in the previous chapter (see chapter 2.3) facilitated by the method.

Publications of both teams, although quite different in their structure, show awareness of the limitations of oral history and provide complex interdisciplinary analysis<sup>151</sup> of the interviews. For it should not be forgotten that interpretations of oral history includes about

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<sup>149</sup> D. Dijanić, I.Niemčić, M. Merunka-golubić, D. Stanić *Ženski biografski leksikon - Sjećanje žena na život u socijalizmu* (Women's Biographical Dictionary - Women's Memories of Life in Socialism), Centar za zenske studije,Zagreb 2004, p379.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid p 388.

<sup>151</sup> The Croatian team in fact does not provide the thorough analysis of the interviews as the Slovak publication, but they explicitly point out that "The oral history method does not reproduce reality nor does it reproduce historical, sociological or feminist material and this is why it is necessary for the interviews to be analyzed."D.Dijanic I.Niemcic, M.Merunka Golubic, D.Stanic, *Zenski biografski leksikon – sjecanje zena na život u socijalizmu* (Women's Biographical Dictionary- Women's Memories of Life in Socialism), Centar za zenske studije,Zagreb 2004, p385.

detecting meaning both of what has been said and what has been left unsaid, together with bearing in mind the mechanisms of memory. Hence, a reader can assess the books according to his/ her interests, since both of them can appeal to non academic and academic audience. The Vojvodina team did a similar thing although with modified methodology. The original method, as we saw, was adapted to different aims of the project which were also educational. Therefore, the shortcomings and the biases that could stem from the inadequacy of the inexperienced interviewers are explained and in a way justified by the educational goals of training the young researchers in the method. The set of questions was modified according to the personal interests of the interviewer; however the important thing in the publications is that Savic provides full accounts and explanations for all of them. In this way, those who read the book from the non/academic audience have the opportunity (if they want), to think and conclude for themselves what kind of credibility and weight these narratives have as personal, subjective accounts “colored” by the inherent specificities of the very method. At the same time, all the advantages of the method which are illustrated throughout the life stories are not to be minimized. On the contrary, the importance and resourcefulness of them stays equally meaningful.

On the other hand, what are the implications when publishing interviews “as they are?” Although it must be acknowledged that these publications do give an important insight into everyday life, through personal memories of women who had not had the chance to speak and be visible in public discourse, as I have concluded in the chapter 2, it is important to account for what is invisible but inbuilt in the text. The range of issues includes both the researcher and the respondent in their collaborative process of creating a testimony. Without providing insight into all the complex issues inherent in the methodological choices, such a de-contextualized subjective representation of the individual memory and individual

testimony runs the risk of generalizing the experience of the larger population. This is exactly why the ethics and responsibility of the researcher have to be at a highest level.

Moreover, for a scholarly audience, all the above mentioned stands. However, what is at stake is the question of approaching the text as a secondary source, already bearer of five times filtered interpretation (memory-narrator-interviewer-transcript-editing-plus potentially the meaning gets filtered even through language). One has to be aware that “revisiting interviews with a different purpose,”<sup>152</sup> different than the one the first researcher had in mind means facing the questions which are both ethical and theoretical. First of all, scholars need to have access to the original, censored and unedited interview and all the additional documents made by the interviewer (‘biogramme’, protocol, summary) in order to use them for further research, further interpretation for a different purpose; and second of all, we have to be extremely aware about taking into account the social and historical context of the data both original and subsequent. Even then, in ideal circumstances when such archives are digitalized and assessable, we have a dilemma about authority: who has the authority to interpret the narrative of the interview if he/she has not conducted it him/ her self?

Therefore, it is up to historians and other scholars to make conscious choices about their work, but we have to be responsible for those choices since we are operating within the sphere of public knowledge. It is our responsibility to inform the non-academic audience about our aims, methods and agendas, because the consequences of representing the past might easily entail unintended consequences in the future.

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<sup>152</sup> Joanna Bornat “A Second Take: Revisiting Interviews with a Different Purpose”, *Oral History*, Vol. 31, No. 1, the Interview Process (spring, 2003), pp. 47-53.

## CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this thesis is two-fold. The first one addresses the ongoing debate about memory and history and their relationship. My intention regarding this discourse was to look into answers that an international oral history project entitled “Women’s Memory” brings to this debate in its practice and with its outcomes. Do the compilations of biographical interviews represent a ‘body of knowlege’ or do oral historians maybe claim much less for these interviews- range of subjective, personal experience, getting ‘other voices heard’ and destabilizing relations of oppression and making those historically at the margins of the social order at the center? And if there is no such a thing as an all-inclusive, overarching historical account and all histories are partial, what is the relationship between history and memory as a subjective experience? Do these representations of memory gained from the interviews conducted within the Women’s Memory project need to be combined with “history proper” and put against a broader historical context?

The second aim relates to my intention to examine the Women’s Memory Project’s mission through the choices of the representation (publishing), of remembering (memories of the interviewed women) and its potential audience (academic and non academic). How and to what extent do the publications from the Women’s Memory Project contextualize the texts as memories and what are the implications?

To answer these questions I first contextualized the framework of the boom of memory studies which happened in the last decades of the 20th century. I defined memory as a fluid category and a powerful means through which people make sense of the past. I defined oral history as a tool of recovering this memory. I then provided thorough theoretical frames within which oral history has been defined as a historical research tool that stresses the quest for a subjective, psychological truth. In addition, I accounted for the specificities of the feminist approach to oral history with the emphasis on coordinated, joint action between



interviewer and interviewee in which a narrative has been created. I stressed the importance of methodology used in an interview and the choices made in its application through analyzing my interviews done with the international coordinators of the Czech, Croatian, Vojvodinian, Montenegrin and Serbian teams. I then defined the end product of an interview as text, impregnated by different meanings and biases caused by the interaction of the participants of the interview, and their socio-cultural contexts.

I established the nature of the interview as a subjective interpretation of the past in the form of a text, whose one of the purposes is to be analyzed and interpreted in the future in order to convey meaning and unveil the mechanism of memory; I looked into the available publications which I interpret as the presentations of the (interviewees') representation of the past. I have concluded that the aim and the method of the research are inherent in the final product – a text. A text, by being published, becomes available to the public and constitutes a body of knowledge. Choices in addressing the reader's audience in this respect imply the politics of the representation of memory of the past, because that is what the books are in the textual form. The structure of a book means making the structuring of knowledge that is publicly available.

Having examined the publications of the Slovak, Croatian, Vojvodinian, Serbian and to a certain extent Czech teams, I conclude that in the best possible situation is when the published interviews include an explanation of the feminist approach applied and historical context. For the academic audience the information about the aims, methods and biases of the study are essential if scholars are "revisiting interviews with a different purpose."<sup>153</sup> The lack of resources and long term funding to create archives is unfortunate, since access to the original, unedited versions is indispensable for future use. Since the very nature of doing

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<sup>153</sup> J. Bornat "A Second Take: Revisiting Interviews with a Different Purpose", *Oral History*, Vol. 31, No. 1, the Interview Process (spring, 2003), pp. 47-53.

biographical interviews (as can be seen from the experiences of the members of this project) is an arduous, long and demanding process which includes many ‘invisible’ hours of work, this can speak to how funding is allocated and is to be taken into consideration by the future funding of similar projects.

The un-interpreted, un-contextualized interview presents subjective interpretations have value, in terms of the political dimension of this feminist project, but if funding and circumstances permit, publishing interviews with the historical and cultural context and/ or interpretation, and a thorough methodological overview is more usefull and preferable. Thus, oral history source is indeed an important and vivid complement to the broader historical discourse within which it needs to be positioned.

Coming back to the question of the relationship between memory and history, I conclude that, no matter how important of a source for the history of everyday life an oral history account is, it should not be deprived of historical background since it represents only an interpretation of the past through the prism of memory. Furthermore, the task of oral history is to find meaning, to make sense of the past that has been made sense of.

Thus, history and memory are complementary and hence should avail of each others’ advantages. Nevertheless, when it comes to the relationship regarding the subject matter of the research, oral history may to a certain extent “stand alone” when the subjects are marginalized, non-hegemonic groups in society without written history, whose only history is that of narration.

My research is an effort in understanding the practices of doing an international oral history project in Eastern and Central Europe. The Women’s Memory project shows the advantages and necessities of having this kind of project for the purpose of learning about women’s lives and their identities during socialism through the prism of their own experience of everyday life in the places where such discourse was not available. In the future it is hoped

that it would be possible for the interviews to be accessible through archives. Finally it confirms the indispensability of the highest standards of research, training, awareness and responsibility in doing oral history.

## TABLES

**TABLE 2. 1 - MY INTERVIEW GUIDELINES - Set of questions for my interviews**

1. a) Could you tell me something about how did the project start (question only for Pavla Frydlova) b) Could you tell me something about how did you get involved and interested in the project?
1. What was the original <b>AIM</b> of the project?
2. Did it change or evolve throughout the research?
3. According to which <b>criteria</b> was the selected sample of the interviewed women made?
4. It seems that this kind of interviewing involves the interviewer as much as the interviewee. How do you feel about this interaction?
5. (Follow up on the previous question): A: Do you feel that some of your personal experiences or sensitivities could have influenced the flow of the interview? B: To what extent were the questions maybe constructed on what you thought you would find?
6. Did some of the answers come as a surprise to you?
7. Were there any women who you for example wanted to interview, but at the end it did not happen for some reason?
8. During the interviews, did you ever feel that some questions the interviewee was particularly reluctant to answer?
9. What would you say were <b>the most sensitive topics</b> for the women?
10. What was the hardest question you had to ask?
11. Were you able to notice a certain <b>overlapping of the social and personal</b> (public and private) in some of the fields of their everyday life?
12. How did you feel the broader historical context was represented in these testimonies? (Follow up): To what extent would you say that these life stories could be placed against a broader historical background?
13. What do you think are, from today's perspective of conducted interviews, the <b>advantages and disadvantages of the method</b> ?
14. Since several national teams were involved in the project, were <b>there any discussions, debates</b> concerning methodological issues?
15. What did the research show?
16. I'm aware that you have organized several international conferences. Did you draw some conclusions or concepts from different national projects? * If not mentioned: Can we speak of a concept such as (" <b>woman's identity in socialism</b> ")
17. What was the reaction to the published materials?
18. Who has shown interest in these stories?
19. Did anyone to your knowledge use the materials for educational purposes, such as teaching with oral history or similar?
20. What did this experience of conducted interviews mean to you personally?
21. What are you working on at the moment? Plans for the future of the project?

**TABLE 2.2. - MY INTERVIEWEES**

The names of my interviewees are placed in the table according to my understanding of their position in the Women's Memory project.

Name	Position in the project	Profession	Publications within the project
<b>Pavla Frydlova</b>	the international coordinator, Prague	Dramaturg, journalist, translator, writer, author for TV, cinema and radio. Film historian. Cofounder and Board Member of Gender Studies Center, Prague	<b>Ženy odjinud</b> [Women from elsewhere]; <b>Ženy mezi dvěma světy</b> [Women in between two worlds]; <b>Ženám patří půlka nebe</b> [Women own half of the sky]; [A Woman endures more than a person: Twentieth Century in the life stories of ten women], and many others.
<b>Nadezda Cetkovic</b>	Coordinator of the Serbian team, Belgrade	Philosopher, peace activist, feminist	<b>Danubian Basin German Women</b> (Dunavske Švabice) I and II, <b>Masks and Cloaks from Crepe</b> (Maske i plaševi od krep papira); <b>Politika na ženski način</b> (Politics at Women's Approach); <b>Maštarije o vidljivosti</b> (Dreaming on Visibility)
<b>Svenka Savic</b>	one of the former coordinators of the Serbian team, now the general coordinator of an independent oral history project, Life Stories of Women in Vojvodina, Novi Sad	Psycholinguist, co-founder and director of Women Studies Novi Sad, ballet critic	A sto cu ti ja jedna pricati; Romani Woman I and II; Skola romologije (School of Romology); Vajdasagi Magyar Nők (Hungarian Women in Vojvodina); Vojvodjanke (The Women of Vojvodina 1917-1930; Feministička teologija (The Feminist theology), Women's Identities in Vojvodina; Pogled unazad: o igri i baletu ( The look behind: dance and ballet)
<b>Dijana Dijanic</b>	Coordinator of the Croatian team, Zagreb	Historian	<b>Ženski biografski leksikon</b> - Sjećanje žena na život u socijalizmu (Women's Biographical Dictionary – Women's Memories of Life in Socialism)
<b>Ljupka Kovacevic</b>	Coordinator of the Montenegrin team, Kotor	psychologist	<b>Sjećam se</b> (I Remember) - 12 interviews
<b>Veronika Mitro</b>	Archivist and asst. of the Life Stories of Women in Vojvodina project, Novi Sad	psychologist	A sto cu ti ja jedna pricati; Romani Woman II; Skola romologije (School of Romology); Vajdasagi Magyar Nők (Hungarian Women in Vojvodina); Life Stories of Slovakian Women in Vojvodina; Nevidljive –Ljudska prava Romkinja u Vojvodini (The Invisibles- the Rights of Roma Women in Vojvodina)

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