

Learning for Peace

Project Report

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INTRODUCTION

The first workshop organised as part of *Learning for Peace*, an international cooperation project founded by Erasmus+, took place on the 23rd of March 2023, at the Sigmund Freud University, in Vienna. Experts in psychotherapy, psychology, social sciences and history came together to discuss challenges and opportunities of Oral History research and narrations of trauma in an effort to find ways of turning Oral History research into engaging education material that promotes peace and conflict prevention.

During the workshop, presenters talked about their individual fields of expertise and shared some of their experiences with Oral History research. The presentations were followed by a discussion session, in the course of which participants collected practical ideas in two groups, working towards a feasible educational approach to be shared with educators during the next workshop in Bratislava, on the 14th of September 2023.

PRESENTATIONS

Andrea Pető, Central European University, Austria

Andrea Pető, historian and professor of gender studies at CEU, talked about the difficulties of facing up to narratives of sexual violence, with special attention to the period of the Second World War in Hungary. She emphasised that there was a lesson to be learnt from the silence and the resulting lack of clarity around the issue.



Confrontation with the events of the past is made especially challenging by the sparseness of sources in general, by the fact that the sources we do have are mostly oral and by the illiberal nature of contemporary Hungarian memory politics, which causes the history of sexual violence being appropriated and turned into a “men’s story”. While the film *Silenced Shame*, available on YouTube with English subtitles, successfully shifted the discussion, an attempt at the visual representation of the oral sources was not without controversies. Hoping that art could synthesise the perspectives of the different scientific fields dealing with the subject, the city of Budapest invited an international jury to vote on a memorial to be set up in Budapest. According to an opinion poll however, less than ten percent of the general population agreed with the jury’s choice of memorial, which raises important questions. At the same time, a book written by Andrea Pető (*Elmondani az elmondhatatlant – To Speak the Unspeakable*) about rape and sexual abuse in Hungary during the Second World War was received with interest and generated a great amount of response.

Monika Vrzgulová, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Slovakia



Monika Vrzgulová has a background in Holocaust research and has been using Oral History for more than two decades. She considers the so-called interviewee-led approach – a respectful and emphatic method, which provides an opportunity for interviewees to talk about their memories without interruption – her second nature. While doing research this way is admittedly time-consuming, it results in a deeper level of understanding and has been seen to generate inter-generational conversation and an increased level of general interest. Having found its way to public discourse, her research has influenced official narratives of the Holocaust.

Tina Plasil-Laschober, MenschenLeben, Universität Wien, Austria

In 2009, a nationwide Oral History project, called MenschenLeben (Human Life), was launched in Austria. As part of the project, life story interviews have been collected, archived and made accessible in Österreichische Mediathek, Austria’s leading audio-visual archive. The overall aim of the project has been to establish a contemporary, life-history collection with the help of “ordinary” Austrians – people of different



cultural, social and regional backgrounds. What makes the project especially unique is that interviews do not concentrate on a given topic or a pre-defined subject; rather, complete life stories are collected, using a classic approach, in which free narration is followed by questions about the different spheres of life, such as family background, relationships, emotional ups and downs or historic events. Acknowledging that interviewees may not remember everything perfectly well, the emphasis is not on finding out about historic truth but on discovering how certain events may affect the next generation.

MenschenLeben interviews last for four hours on average, with quite some variance. While the interviewees' rights are protected through legal release forms – i.e. interviewees can decide who can have access to which parts of the interview – the researchers can add extra restrictions to avoid potential conflicts with relatives, acquaintances or the authorities.

Even though transcribed interviews are admittedly easier to research, no full transcripts are provided, not only due to the amount of work it would inevitably involve but also because the researchers are quite convinced that by actually listening to the interviews, one can obtain a more realistic picture. Keywords, subject headings, a general description of the interview process and partial transcriptions with timecodes help researchers, teachers or journalists to find the interviews they need, and to navigate the audio files.

Aware that traumatic events might be touched upon during the interviews, enough time is set aside for each individual meeting to make sure interviewers can do their best to provide emotional support, if needed.

Orsolya Temesvári, Trauma Ambulance, Hungary



Trauma Ambulance has been created with a twofold objective: to contribute to trauma awareness in society and to help individuals and communities to process trauma with the assistance of mental health professionals and volunteers. Orsolya Temesvári found out about the organization following her own traumatic experience: In 2018 she was hit by a car and became paralyzed from the neck down. Now, she works for Trauma Ambulance as a volunteer. They perceive trauma as a completely normal reaction to an abnormal situation and try to help patients, as well as the wider society, to deal with questions such as *What are your options when someone asks you a question that brings up a bad memory and triggers trauma?* or *What happens when someone labels you due to your trauma?*

Borbála Klacsmann, University College Dublin, Ireland

Borbála Klacsmann's *Holokausztörténetek* (Stories of the Holocaust) project investigates the role of micro-communities in the Holocaust. She set up a digital platform, a Facebook Page, which provides not only accessible, easy to follow information to the wider public in the form of "popular science" but also an opportunity for dialogue. Individual posts deal with the story of one family, one person or one aspect of the Holocaust at a time and are accompanied by a photo or a video.

The project aims to generate historical knowledge, commemorate everyday people, who tend to remain invisible in impersonal accounts of political history, and to provide an alternative to the highly confusing contemporary memory politics of the Hungarian state.



The following may be worth considering when creating a similar Facebook page:

- pictures and videos help to increase the number of views
- the first sentence of a post is of special importance, it plays a decisive role in whether people read on or not
- one needs to post regularly, ideally one or twice a week
- topics that seem to be especially popular can be returned to
- posts can be shared in other, relevant groups
- one needs to be approachable, keep in touch with followers and share information about one's professional career
- sharing information about the number of followers (milestones) increases the feeling of community
- people tend to be more active on days of remembrance and anniversaries, it is advisable to create a post on these days

An issue waiting to be solved is that while such a digital platform can be very useful for educational purposes, there is a considerable risk that the page will be visited by people who already show interest in the subject and not by those who have very little knowledge in the field and hence could profit from such an opportunity the most.

Vincent Brendan Lehmann, Volkskundemuseum Wien (Vienna Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art), Austria

The Education Department of the Volkskundemuseum has recently formulated a draft concept on how complex historical issues can be explained to younger audiences. The museum also created an educational programme titled *Questions of Origins: Why Objects Came to the Museum as a Result of National Socialism and How We Deal With Them*. Both the draft concept and the educational programme were inspired by a current exhibition: *Collected at Any Cost! Why Objects Came to the Museum as a Result of National Socialism and How We Deal With Them*.



As art restitution is a highly complex and intricate issue, the museum decided to organise workshops for younger audiences to help them understand why and how the Volkskundemuseum decided, of its own accord, to abide by the 1998 Federal Act on the Restitution of Art from Austrian Federal Museums and Collections.

The 90-minute long workshops are intended for children and young adults between the ages of 13 and 19, and consist of three parts: two “thought experiments” and a guided tour of the exhibition. As part of the first thought experiment, participants are asked to think of five objects in their ownership that they feel attached to and consider precious for any reason. They are to imagine that they need to part with them all, except for one, due to ever-changing rules and regulations in their country. Finally, they are forced to leave their city. The thought experiment is followed by a 20-minute long guided tour around the exhibition *Collected at Any Cost!*, during which participants also have the chance to listen to two interviews. In the third, and final, part of the workshop, participants are asked to imagine that, after a long period of time, they can finally return to their city. In theory, they have the right to reclaim their belongings listed at the beginning of the workshop but some of the objects have gone missing and some of them are now in private ownership. In line with the Restitution Act presently in effect in Austria, they can only reclaim whatever is in public ownership. The workshop ends with a final reflection.

Zoltán Kőrös, Forum Institute, Slovakia

Forum is a minority research institute that mainly focuses on ethnic minorities living in Slovakia. They have a longstanding tradition of carrying out Oral History research. A large majority of the interviews in their archive concentrate on the period between 1938 and 1968. Outstanding topics of research include the occupation of Hungary by the German army during World War II., stories of captivity, the Holocaust, the period between 1945 and 1948 – also termed as “the years without a homeland” from the perspective of the Hungarian population that found itself in the territory of the newly established Czechoslovakia – and the time of the Hungarian revolution in 1956.



Éva Kovács, Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies, Austria

Éva Kovács's presentation concentrated on the importance of listening skills when carrying out oral history research. She drew attention to the problem of epistemic silence and ontological "deafness".



If we do not really hear what our interviewees are trying to tell us, we cannot adequately (re)present their voices. Life narratives of marginalised people are dependent on the knowledge production of the majority in that the dominant discourse of the majority society may prevent its members from "hearing" what is being said. As interviewers, it is our responsibility to try and be aware of the restrictions and limitations posed by our perspective and be prepared to listen to stories that may not fit our original research design.

Analysing a concrete example, Éva Kovács told the story of a group of, otherwise outstanding, Hungarian sociologists, whose aim was to find out about issues of inequality in contemporary Hungarian society and interviewed members of the Roma community as part of their research. Several of their interviewees tried to give an account of their persecution during the Second World War. Feeling convinced that stories of Roma persecution were exaggerated and that Roma were entertaining an over-romanticised image of themselves, the interviewers forgot much of what they had been told and could not even recall how many of their interviewees were Holocaust survivors. All in all, the researchers attitude reflected the conviction that their research subjects intended to falsify history and it was their task to make sure they did not succeed. Éva Kovács underlined that this is a trap any researcher can fall into – a trap we do not really know how to avoid.

Erzsébet Fanni Tóth, Sigmund Freud University, Austria



Erzsébet Fanni Tóth conducted thirty semi-structured, life-story interviews in southern, rural parts of Slovakia about deportation-related memories of villagers during the post-World War II. period as part of her PhD research, titled "Just Sitting and Talking", named after a well-known, Hungarian talk-show. One of the concerns that came up during the research was to try and make sure that the interviews did not lose their original meaning during the various levels of language and code switching, inherently involved in research spanning over different regional, social and linguistic territories.

Having completed her PhD, in 2013, Erzsébet Fanni Tóth launched a Facebook page, titled *Perbetei életmesék* (Life stories from Perbete), as a reaction to which several people got in touch with her and told stories

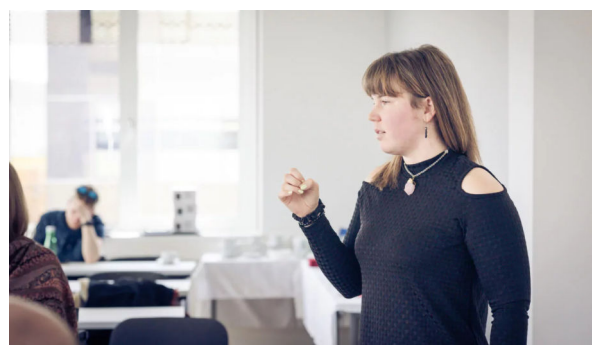
not only of deportation but, more generally, stories of silenced communities. Thanks to a number of radio interviews, a gradual understanding of the importance and difficulty of talking about trauma emerged.

Working together with a children's book author from Hungary and an illustrator from Serbia, Erzsébet Fanni Tóth also published a book, in which a child tells the story of the deportation of her family. Each chapter ends with some advice on how we can talk about difficult questions like deportation, within the family.

While non-traditional trajectories, like above, have clearly plenty to offer, they also raise important questions concerning the definition of scientific research, the entitlement to carry out research and the (self-)censorship that defines our narratives.

Nina Pomposova, Post Bellum, Slovakia

Post Bellum is an NGO devoted to the collection and documentation of authentic personal stories and testimonies from the time of the Second World War and the communist regime. The Post Bellum collection includes hundreds of testimonies compiled in the Memory of Nations database. Education being one of their top priorities, they post short films on Instagram and Facebook and organize workshops at schools.



ON THE WAY TOWARDS A FEASIBLE EDUCATIONAL APPROACH

During the discussion that followed the presentations, participants shared their experiences of using Oral History in education in two groups, then reported back to the whole group for further discussion.

Group 1

Keeping in mind that one of the primary aims of the *Learning for Peace* project is to promote peaceful coexistence within our societies, the group compiled a list of important topics to be included in the education programme. Alongside ethnic differences, social inequality and gender, they emphasised the need to draw attention to coping strategies that have emerged from Oral History data, and their potential use in the students' lives.



One might choose one emblematic story to work on with students, and hence move from the personal aspect to the universal, or, alternatively, use a collection of short segments from different interviews.

Oral History interviews have the power to promote intergenerational communication. Working with a narrative from a couple of decades ago, students can be asked to imagine that an interviewee was one of their grandparents. Following a discussion about the identity, geopolitical or social mobility of this person, students can be asked to continue the story. *What would your mother's life be like? What kind of choices would she make? What would you do?*

Yet another way to involve students in a story is to read them a letter and ask them to reply or, alternatively, ask them to continue someone's memoir.

A good way to preserve the uniqueness and the personal nature of a narrative while also helping students to see events in a larger context is to create biographical, historical and perhaps even industrial timelines, and portray them next to each other. One might also draw a map to help visualise the location and the context of a life story.

During the discussion phase, two issues came up that the group could not, as yet, resolve: ethical questions and the question of conflicting memories.

Group 2

The second group collected prerequisites of intergenerational exchange or being able to talk openly about personal history and trauma within the family. They emphasised the importance of skills such as emotional literacy and empathic listening, as well as the significance of being able and allowed to ask questions. The

group saw it as imperative to achieve an understanding of life stories as nuanced and complex, i.e. to show to students that actions or persons cannot necessarily be polarised into good and bad. Podcasts, workshops and role-play were considered as practical tools to promote awareness of traumatic experiences and their role in our societies.



CONCLUSION

Participants agreed that the questions and issues raised during the workshop in Vienna could and should be used as a powerful tool and an input for the next workshop in Bratislava.

List of Participants

Klacsman, Borbála	University College Dublin	Ireland
Kőrös, Zoltán	Forum	Slovakia
Kovács, Éva	Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies	Austria
Lehmann, Vincent Brendan	Volkskundemuseum	Austria
Lelovics, Andrea	Forum	Slovakia
Nina Pomposova	Post Bellum	Slovakia
Pető, Andrea	Central European University	Austria
Plasil, Tina	MenschenLeben, University of Vienna	Austria
Polovková, Sandra	Post Bellum	Slovakia
Temesvári, Marianna		
Temesvári, Orsolya	Trauma Ambulance	Hungary
Tóth, Erzsébet Fanni	Sigmund Freud University	Austria
Trencsényi, Klára	Central European University, University of Drama and Film, Budapest, Sigmund Freud University	Austria
Vrzgulova, Monika	Slovak Academy of Sciences	Slovakia
