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# Oral History as Process-generated Data

Alexander Freund\*

**Abstract:** »*Oral History als prozess-generierte Daten*«. This article describes how to use (archived) oral histories as process-generated data. It explains how social scientists may locate and use such data in an informed way and assess the qualities of such data systematically and effectively. The article describes oral history as a method and as form of source or data; it surveys aspects of oral history that affect data analysis and interpretation, including project design, recording technology, interview strategies and interviewer skills/training, interviewee-interviewer relationship, the dialogic construction of the source, legal and ethical aspects, summaries and transcriptions, the orality of the sources and the importance of listening to sources. The article then problematizes the use of oral histories as *evidence* by discussing subjectivity, memory, retrospectivity, and narrativity and exploring the meanings, values, and validity of this kind of data.

**Keywords:** History, Oral History, Historical Methodology, Historical Sources, Memory, Orals History Archives, Digital Sources, Subjectivity, Retrospectivity, Narrativity, Recording Technology, Interviews, Interpretative Methods.

## I. Introduction

Oral History conventionally is not considered as process-generated data, because it is the researcher (the oral historian or interviewer) who identifies research subjects (interviewees, narrators, informants, interview partners, eye-witnesses or *Zeitzeugen*) and conducts interviews to address specific research questions and problems. One may therefore describe this kind of oral history as researcher generated data (as opposed to process-generated data). Oral history, however, is more than that. A large number of oral histories have been created as primary sources for other researchers rather than as sources to answer specific research problems. For example, archivists have been creating oral histories in order to “balance” their collections with sources produced by underrepresented groups. And the large oral history centres in the United States were set up as archives for the oral histories they created. Whether collected for a specific project or an archive, what makes interviews into oral histories - and what distinguishes oral history from qualitative interviews conducted in other disciplines - is that oral histories are made accessible to other researchers through

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their deposition in public repositories (Ritchie 2003: 24). In view of its eventual archiving, the interview is usually recorded on (high quality) audio or video media, often summarized, and sometimes transcribed. Although this ideal of archiving is not always met, the idea of archiving the interviews has been a fundamental principle of the practice of oral history for over half a century. Thus there now exists a vast global archive of previously produced oral histories that researchers may use to address their own research questions. These interviews, conducted by other researchers, may be considered process-generated data similar to data produced for purposes other than that of the researcher at hand.

The trick - and this is the main point of this article - is to find ways to tease information out of these data for one's own purposes. Knowing about the nature of oral history sources as well as the method of and theoretical discourse about oral history offers a path to a more efficient and effective use of oral history interviews. This article therefore describes oral history as a source and method and provides an introduction to the theoretical debates in the field. The main idea to keep in mind when reading the following survey is this: In order to make full use of oral histories, it is fruitful to understand them not simply as sources to be mined for facts (data), but rather as complex social constructs that are inherently subjective and thus offer multiple layers of meaning. Alessandro Portelli, one of the most renowned oral historians, expressed it perhaps best when he said that oral histories "tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did" (1981: 100).

For the purpose of this article, I will call oral histories that are used in such a secondary manner 'process-generated oral history' (PGOH), but I should note that this term is not used in the literature on oral history. When referring to the conventional use of oral history as well as the method of oral history, I will simply speak of oral history, as is commonly done in the field. When I refer to oral history documents, I will interchangeably use the terms oral history, oral history document, interview, life story interview, life narrative, or life story to indicate the great variety of methods in creating oral history documents and to indicate the diversity of the kinds of data that are generated through such methods. American oral historian Valerie Yow (2005: 3-4) has added "self-report, personal narrative, life story, oral biography, memoir, testament," as well as "in-depth interview, recorded memoir, life history, life narrative, taped memories, life review" to the variety of terms used in different disciplines, all of which "imply that there is someone else involved who frames the topics and inspires the narrator to begin the act of remembering, jogs memory, and records and presents the narrator's words."

Although oral *tradition* is often collected in the process of conducting oral histories, this form of oral evidence is not addressed in this paper, in part because the field of oral history has not yet systematically addressed its relation-

ship to oral tradition. To clarify: Oral history is concerned with collecting stories about the subject's own experience. Oral tradition is a form of historical knowledge that is transferred orally from one generation to the next through storytelling and other forms of oral communication.

In the following, I first describe the history and method of oral history and the data that are produced by this method (II). I then describe the characteristics of oral history as process-generated data and introduce some of the problems with this kind of data (III). In the following sections, I discuss in more detail some of the opportunities, challenges, and limits of process-generated oral history (IV-VII). Throughout, I use a specific case study to clarify my argument.

## II. Oral History as Researcher Generated Data

Standard handbooks of oral history, which have been produced mostly for English-reading audiences and are based mostly on empirical work in the West, like to trace the history of oral history back to “the scribes of the Zhou dynasty in China” some 3,000 years ago (Ritchie 2003: 19) and especially to Thucydides and Herodotus, who relied on interviews with eyewitnesses and bearers of oral tradition (Thompson 2000: 31; Ritchie 2003: 20; Yow 2005: 2; cf. also Sharpless 2006: 19-20). With the invention of the phonograph in 1877, scholars were given a means to record the voices of their informants. American and Canadian folklorists were among the first to use such devices to record songs and oral tradition of indigenous peoples. Various US projects during the Great Depression recorded stories, songs, and folklore, and during the 1940s, war correspondents for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and other radio stations lugged heavy recorders around the battlefields of Europe (Freund 2009; Morrissey 1980; Sharpless 2006: 21-22).

The modern practice of oral history is commonly seen as having emerged at Columbia University's Oral History Research Office, established by the historian Allan Nevins in 1948. He interviewed the American political, economic, academic, and cultural elites (with a focus on New York City). Nevins had noted that an increasing number of the elite conducted an increasing amount of its correspondence on the telephone, thus leaving no trace of important decision making processes for historians to study. And he noticed that the increasingly hectic lifestyle of modernity kept the male elite from writing extensive correspondence and memoirs. To make up for this loss, he began to conduct intensive, semi-structured interviews (Nevins 1966). Because the recording technology was in its childhood (using wire to record), the audio media were often either re-used or destroyed after they had been transcribed (Pogue, 1980: 95). Columbia's practice led to the conviction that the edited and annotated transcript, checked and approved by the interviewee, was the primary source. This practice was continued even when improved reel-to-reel recorders and the

introduction of the mass market cassette tape recorder made it affordable and possible to preserve the original audio recordings. Eventually, Columbia and other research centers decided to archive the audio recordings. In Canada, radio journalists and archivists were at the forefront of this new methodology, and they decided early on to view the recordings as the original sources that needed to be archived.

With the wide availability of recording technology in the 1960s and the growing interest in social history, an increasing number of researchers inside and (more often than not) outside of academia conducted interviews to find out about the experiences of women, workers, immigrants, indigenous peoples, and other marginalized and oppressed groups that they wanted to 'write into history.' Many of these researchers worked on shoestring budgets and often did not have the resources to transcribe the hundreds and thousands of hours of recordings. This led to new theoretical positions: Some argued that a transcript was not necessary, because the audio recording was the original source while the transcript, if valuable at all, was only an imperfect rendition of this original source. At the same time, other researchers developed ever more refined methods of transcription. While oral historians did not develop or use codes like those in qualitative social science or linguistics, they discussed how much editing was legitimate and they experimented with poetic and musical forms of transcription (Baum 1981; Wilmsen 2001). Archivists lamented that researchers would not listen to the audio recordings if they had transcripts, but they would not use the oral histories at all if there were no transcripts. At the same time, archivists and librarians have not made it easy for researchers to use the recordings (Smith et al. 2004, 10).

There was another major shift during the 1970s. Nevins and his colleagues had often created interviews without any specific project in mind. The major goal was to create an archival source that could be used by a wide variety of researchers (and the intense use of the oral history collection at Columbia certainly proved them right in setting these goals). From the 1960s on, however, researchers often conducted oral history interviews to find answers for specific questions. For example, and here I am introducing the case study I follow through the rest of the article, the historian Arthur Grenke interviewed 65 German immigrants in Winnipeg, Manitoba in the early 1970s to find out about their community in the first half century after the founding of Winnipeg in the early 1870s. He had located the interviewees with the help of German churches and clubs and through other interviewees. He had also contacted prominent Germans mentioned in newspapers. Grenke recorded the interviews on reel-to-reel tapes and deposited them at the Manitoba Museum in Winnipeg. The interviews were not transcribed, but topical indexes were created and cassette tape copies were available for listening onsite or for purchase. Grenke used the interviews for his dissertation about the formation and early development of Winnipeg's German community between 1872 and 1919 (Grenke 1975). His is

a typical example of oral history as a means of “filling the gaps” in an ever-expanding attempt to reconstruct the past. For academic projects, such as theses, dissertations, articles and books as well as for non-academic publications, oral history has been used as one among many kinds of sources. Indeed, Grenke relied mostly on statistics, newspaper articles, and other written documents.

I was interested in these interviews for a completely different topic: German-Canadians’ ways of dealing with the Nazi past after 1945. While my own research focuses on German post-World War Two immigrants and their children and grandchildren, I wanted to include prewar immigrants in my research in order to look for differences and similarities and thus to better contextualize and understand the postwar immigrants’ perceptions and experiences. My assumption was that even though I knew the interviews were for a project about the time before 1920, interviewees - at least if given the opportunity by a skilled interviewer - would nevertheless talk about the postwar years because that was the time in which the interviews were conducted. Another reason I was interested in these interviews was that they were conducted before public discourse in Canada shifted from World War Two to the Holocaust (Freund 2006, 2008; Novick 1999). These early interviews provided an unusual opportunity to gain insight into German-Canadians’ perception from that time period.

### III. Oral History As Process-generated Data (PGOH)

Over the last century, oral historians have created a huge global archive of sources or data. Best known perhaps is Steven Spielberg’s Shoah Foundation and its Visual History Archive of 52,000 video interviews with Holocaust survivors. Other large repositories include national archives, libraries, and centres. The National Archives of Singapore, for example, hold some 16,000 hours of oral history recordings. Columbia University’s Oral History Research Office has nearly 8,000 oral histories, many of them dozens of hours long, making up nearly one million pages of transcript. The Multicultural History Society of Ontario (Canada) collected 3,871 interviews with people from over fifty ethnocultural groups, which is only one of 1,840 oral history collections indexed in the *Guide to Oral History Collections in Canada* (Fortier, 1993). Some 1,500 interviews are located at the Institute for History and Biography at the Fernuniversität Hagen (Germany).

And yet, researchers have been reluctant to use other people’s interviews. They are often eager to rush out and conduct their own interviews, even though oral history is an extremely labour-intensive research method. If researchers use other researchers’ oral histories at all, they often only use the transcripts (as is the case, for example, at Columbia University) or even only the summaries (as is sometimes the case at the Multicultural History Society). Seldom do they go to the length of listening to (or watching) the interviews.

Time and technology, however, are changing these dynamics. There is now a wealth of oral history material for time periods for which conducting new interviews is impossible, because eyewitnesses are no longer alive. All former slaves in the United States are now dead, as are almost all pioneers of the American and Canadian West and as are almost all veterans of the First World War. We now have to rely on interviews conducted by earlier generations of researchers. For my own research on German-Canadians' memories of the Nazi period, I can no longer interview Germans who immigrated to the Canadian West before the First World War. But I have access to the interviews Art Grenke conducted in 1971. At the same time, archived oral histories provide insights into the times of their production. Thus, the Grenke interviews help me understand how German-Canadians' grappled with the Nazi past in the early 1970s, while some 300 interviews with German-Canadians conducted by the Multicultural History Society of Ontario in the late 1970s and early 1980s and in the late 1990s help me understand German-Canadians' ways of dealing with the Nazi past at other times. In the coming years, an increasing number of historians and other researchers will turn to such sources to answer their questions.

There is another reason why researchers will increasingly turn to oral histories produced by others - and why they will increasingly listen to them rather than rely solely on transcripts or summaries. That reason is digital technology. By 2018, the National Library of Australia plans to have all of its then nearly 45,000 hours of sound materials online (National Library of Australia 2008; Ayres et al. 2006). The Shoah Foundation already has all of its interviews digitized and indexed and made available at research centres around the world (USC 2008), and watching the interviews is the only means by which this massive collection can be used - there are no summaries or transcripts. The Library of Congress has made available online thousands of hours of interviews dating back to 1932 (Library of Congress 2008). The Regional Oral History Office at the University of California (Berkeley) makes parts of its collection available via iTunes and the university's own YouTube site. Around the world, private and public foundations invest in digitizing oral history collections. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation recently gave Columbia University over 370,000 dollars to digitize part (albeit a very small part) of its oral history collection. These efforts make oral history interviews much more easily accessible. Researchers in the past avoided listening to cassette tapes or reel-to-reel tapes not only because it was more time consuming than going through transcripts or summaries, but also because repositories often had only limited means of making such tapes accessible, thus discouraging their use (Smith et al. 2004: 10). Access via computers - be it via the internet or at secure offline workstations at libraries - is becoming easier and more convenient and thus invites the researcher to listen to the interviews, or at least to quickly 'listen in' on some of the interviews.

Nevertheless, using oral histories conducted by other researchers remains - despite digitization - a time consuming research process. For social scientists interested in using PGOH, knowing something about the oral history research method helps them to more effectively and efficiently use oral histories as sources. Oral historians have developed specific methodological procedures and standards that affect the nature and quality of the oral history interview. These include the project design and actual interview process (and here I will include pre- and postproduction, although these are usually examined separately from the actual interviewing techniques), technology and recording media, the interviewer-interviewee relationship, the ethical and legal dimensions of oral history, and interview forms and strategies. Knowing these procedures and standards helps social scientists to evaluate other researchers' projects and decide whether and how to use PGOH.

### Project conceptualization

Oral history projects - whether conducted for a specific research project or to expand an archival collection - are produced in several stages: the pre-production stage, the production stage, and the post-production stage. The pre-production stage includes the steps of conceptualization, research, and interview-preparation. The production stage consists of the actual interview. The post-production stage includes ongoing contact with the interviewees, processing of the interview for archival deposition, and, in the case of specific research projects, analysis and interpretation. According to the American Oral History Association, projects should always follow a basic principle: "Regardless of the purpose of the interviews, oral history should be conducted in the spirit of critical inquiry and social responsibility and with a recognition of the interactive and subjective nature of the enterprise." (Oral History Association 2002). If all these steps are completed as suggested by various guides and introductions to oral history (Ritchie 2003, Yow 2005), the oral history project is ready to be used by other researchers as well.

Unfortunately, in many cases reality differs from the handbook ideal. Time, money, and skills limit what can be accomplished in an oral history project, which sometimes happens to be overly ambitious. At times, first-time oral historians want to conduct as many interviews as possible and leave too little time and money for the pre- and post-production phases. The end results are often poorly conceptualized, poorly recorded, poorly conducted, and poorly documented oral histories that are of limited if any use for other researchers. It all seems so easy: you buy a recorder at the electronics shop next door, find some interesting people, and ask them a lot of questions. When researchers hear that experienced oral historians usually budget at least 1,000 dollars (US) for *one* hour of audio-recorded interview, they are incredulous. But this is



simply a reflection of the time, technology, and skill one needs to invest in a good oral history project. And if this is not done, it shows in the results.

Big oral history centres and institutions are more likely than others to produce first-class oral histories, but this is not always the case. For example, some of the transcripts with German and Austrian Jewish émigrés at Columbia University, for which the original recordings were destroyed, often show smaller or larger blank spaces: words, sentences, even paragraphs not understood by the interviewer and transcriber, perhaps because of a heavy German accent or the use of German. Many of the interviews the Multicultural Historical Society of Ontario conducted in the 1970s and 1980s are of poor quality in every respect, because delayed government funding prevented the institution from training the interviewers. In general, interviewers' fieldnotes and research notes were rarely kept (Nevins 1984: 33-35). For smaller projects, often conducted by one person for an academic project or by a small group of people interested in a specific history, documentation about the project's conceptualization may be incomplete or inaccessible. Publications based on the research, e.g. the theses and dissertations, may then be helpful sources to better understand the oral history interviews. Thus, while the Manitoba Museum has some information about the interviews Art Grenke conducted with German immigrants in Winnipeg, his dissertation provides not only further contextual information (for example, how he located and selected the interviewees), but also short biographies of twenty of his sixty-five interviewees (Grenke 1991). Thus, before listening to the interviews (or reading their transcripts), the researcher should find out as much as possible about the provenance of the collection. A useful tool in evaluating an oral history project is provided by the American Oral History Association's Evaluation Guidelines (Oral History Association 2002).

### Technology and recording media

The vast majority of oral history interviews were conducted on cassette tape and, to a lesser extent, open reel-to-reel recorders from the 1950s to the 2000s (on the history of recording technology, see Morton, 2004). The use of such recorders has been decreasing steadily since 2000 and it has become increasingly difficult to purchase analog recorders and tapes. The majority of the analog tapes has not been stored and cared for properly and is therefore deteriorating. Many tapes have not been transcribed, often have only minimal summaries, and have not been digitized. A huge resource is slowly but surely vanishing.

Increasingly, oral historians record interviews on video instead of audio, which has created a variety of challenges, ranging from production-quality and storage to the influence of the video camera on the interview, ethical and legal implications, and questions researchers need to address regarding the analysis

and interpretation of visual images. At the same time, not all oral histories are recorded on video or audio media. Sometimes, interviewees do not agree to being recorded and the researcher has to either take notes during the interview or create notes from memory after the interview. This question does not need to be addressed here, because such notes are rarely made accessible. Similarly, oral historians have explored the use of email as a form of interviewing, but have been reluctant to include email correspondence in the definition of their discipline. This too then will be excluded from consideration.

Faced then mostly with analog audio recordings, the researcher using archived oral histories must first of all establish that machines are still available that can play the tapes. This is already a substantial problem when it comes to reel-to-reel tapes because of the diversity of format and recording speeds, but even for cassette tapes it is becoming difficult to purchase high quality tape decks for playback (which are needed to compensate for the poor audio quality).

The researcher may consider purchasing and digitizing copies of the tapes he or she is interested in. For smaller numbers of interviews, this can easily be done with free software such as Audacity and a computer with a soundcard. For example, I have the nine Grenke interviews I selected from his 65 as digital files on my computer and iPod. With these digital files, I do not have to worry about deteriorating or breaking tape and they are easily portable. Furthermore, digital files are much more easily searchable than cassette tapes: fast forwarding and rewinding are faster than with cassette tapes and unlike cassette tapes, media player software allows one to skip back and forth and go to precise time points in the interview. Lastly, new qualitative data analysis software such as AtlasTi allows researchers to import and index digital audio files.

When obtaining copies from archives, and even when listening to tapes, the researcher will hardly ever be allowed to listen to the original tapes. I did not have the opportunity to listen to Grenke's original reel-to-reel tapes, but was given a cassette tape copy. Archives do this to preserve the original. The problem is that it is difficult to know whether the copy is exact or missing or mixed up. It is in some ways similar to using a xerox or microfilm copy of an original document. In Grenke's case, for example, several times the last words spoken on Side A of the tape are repeated at the beginning of Side B, so I know there is nothing missing from the original recording. There are also many times where the recording is stopped in the middle of a sentence. It is unclear when this was done: at the time of the interview, the time of the dubbing from the original, or the time of the dubbing from the master cassette tape (the original reel-to-reel tape is not used to produce copies, again in order to preserve it). On two tapes, there are unidentified interviews next to those that are identified to be on the tapes I received from the Manitoba Museum. It is not clear how these different interviews ended up on the same tape. Without being able to listen to the original tape, I cannot say for sure whether the recordings I have are complete.

Further, I am working with the digital files of Grenke's interviews. These digital files, produced by my research assistants, are thrice removed from the original reel-to-reel tape: the original was preserved as a master tape, which was copied to a master cassette tape from which all other copies were made. Thus, we created a digital file from a copy of a copy of the original. The recording is changed in many ways along the way. First, there is a loss of sound quality in each stage of analog dubbing. Second, the reel-to-reel tape of unknown length was broken up into 30-minute segments when it was transferred to cassette tape and then reassembled into 45-minute segments when it was copied from a 60-minute to a 90-minute tape. In the digital files, we digitized one tape (i.e. both sides) as one file, creating one digital audio file per cassette tape. Third, at each stage, there is not only a loss of sound quality, but the potential for further sound quality deterioration by changing various recording settings, for example, recording a Dolby B tape with Dolby C setting, or a non-Metal tape with a Metal setting. Fourth, over the years, recordings deteriorated because of improper storage.

The material condition of sources and the restricted access to originals complicate the work with PGOH, but these limitations are not specific to PGOH. Archival textual documents often confront researchers with similar obstacles to access and use. Knowing about these limitations helps the researcher evaluate the sources at hand more critically. Even on the material level, the sources should not be taken at face value.

### Interviewer-interviewee relationship

Oral historians reject the proposition that interviewers can be detached, objective, and uninvolved and thus without influence on the interview. Indeed, they acknowledge that the interview would not exist without them. American oral historian Ronald J. Grele argued as early as 1975 that the oral history interview is "a conversational narrative: conversational because of the relationship of interviewer and interviewee, and narrative because of the form of exposition - the telling of a tale" (135). This relationship between interviewer and interviewee creates one of the underlying structures of an oral history interview; this structure needs to be understood in order to make sense of the interview. Eva M. McMahan suggests conversation analysis as an approach to explain how the dynamic between interviewer and interviewee shapes the tale that is told (2006) while feminist oral historians point to the gendered relationship of power (cf. Gluck and Patai 1991) and yet others have investigated how race, ethnicity, trauma and other forces influence what story the narrator tells and how he or she tells it (cf. McMahan and Rogers 1994).

The expectations and assumptions of both the interviewer and the interviewee shape the interview. Ritchie explains: "Interviewees take the measure of interviewers [...] and to some degree try to please them by telling what they

want to hear” (2003: 101). He describes one of the best known examples of this influence:

A study of the Federal Writers Project interviews with former slaves, conducted in the 1930s, discovered that an elderly black woman was interviewed twice, once by a white woman and again by a black man. She gave starkly different accounts of her memories of slavery, painting a relatively benign account for the white woman and a much harsher account for the black man. She may well have spoken even more differently to another black woman (2003: 101).

As a result of such findings, oral historians have increasingly taken into consideration how their social status, gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, political conviction, religion, etc. shape their relationship to the interviewee (cf. Oral History Association 2002). Indeed, they actively seek to “share authority” with the interviewee (cf. Frisch 1990). This has added a conscious shaping of the conversational narrative to the subconscious one: Oral historians have become ever more self-conscious of their status of power vis-à-vis their interviewees (cf. Yow 1997: 71-72). This development is further reinforced by university review boards, especially in the United States and Canada, that may make researchers more weary of asking questions that could upset their interviewees. At the same time, however, oral historians have also explored how their disagreement with their interviewees over interpreting their narratives can be fruitfully incorporated in the analysis (Borland 1991).

The stories told are also shaped by the interview setting. It makes a difference whether one interviews a longshoreman at home, at his workplace or his favorite pub. Similarly, time in its many facets plays a role. Memory changes over time and with the narrator’s position in her life course; thus, a 50-year-old in the midst of her career or busy with child rearing will remember her childhood differently than a 70-year-old retiree. Oral historians acknowledge that they cannot know what exactly these differences are. Data for comparison are almost always missing. The vast majority of oral historians do not return to their interviewees 10, 20, or 50 years after the initial interview to compare the story of the 50-year-old with that of the 70-year-old.

What, then, are the implications for social scientists using other researchers’ oral histories? In Ronald Grele’s words, next to listening to the interviewee, “[i]t is equally important to be aware of the interviewer” (Grele 1987: 571). Researchers need to find out as much about the interviewer and the interview setting as possible. It will help them answer why an interviewer asked a certain question at a certain time, why he asked it in a specific way, and why he did not ask other questions. It will help them answer why an interviewee answered questions or told stories in certain ways and why she left out or glossed over certain topics.

In our case study, Art Grenke’s book provides hints about his relationship with his interviewees. The book is about Winnipeg’s German community before 1920. He describes himself as a “new Canadian,” i.e. as an immigrant, and

his interviewees as “old timers” whose “[c]hildren and grandchildren were rapidly being assimilated and frequently had little interest in their backgrounds” (Grenke 1991: Foreword, no page number). He also expresses his hope that other researchers will study other German communities. There is, however, no information about the place of the interviews and we do not know whether Grenke had any ongoing contact with his interviewees. Most of the interviews seem to have taken place in the homes of the interviewees, because they were frequently joined (or interrupted) by family. Several interviewees used German words because they knew Grenke spoke German. This information helps us understand why Grenke focused on the period before 1920 and on the topics of culture and folk traditions such as song and rhymes next to questions about settlement and the demographic make-up of neighbourhoods, work, school and German language education, church, ethnic clubs, and politics. He did not ask questions about sexuality or gender roles, he asked few questions about the period 1920-1945, and no questions about the period after 1945. Thus, the interviews themselves are an important source of information about the interviewer and the interview setting (cf. Grele 1987: 571).

### Ethical and legal aspects of interviews

Social scientists are familiar with the stringent ethical requirements of universities and national research organizations. Such ethics policies usually require researchers to conduct interviews anonymously and confidentially, which means that the interviews are locked away until the conclusion of the project and then destroyed. These requirements are diametrically opposed to the goals of oral history: If interviewees consent - as they often do - to have their names used and published, then oral historians should use their names. The American Oral History Association argues that anonymity should be a last resort: “Interviewers must respect the rights of interviewees to refuse to discuss certain subjects, to restrict access to the interview, or, under extreme circumstances, even to choose anonymity” (Oral History Association 2002). Eventually, interviews should be deposited at public archives and made accessible to other researchers.

For oral historians, especially in North America, the gap between the principles of best practice which they have developed (Oral History Association 2002) and the requirements of review boards has meant fighting battles with review boards to exempt their projects from their university’s ethics policies (Townsend 2008; Janovicek 2006). At the same time, oral historians have had to learn about copyright as well as legal considerations regarding slander and libel (cf. Neuenschwander 2002). It has been standard practice for oral historians to sign release forms and to have their interviewees sign release forms to confer copyright of the interviews to the archives. These release forms also identify any restrictions interviewees have placed on the interviews. At Colum-

bia University, for example, interviewees have many options regarding restrictions: They may close parts or all of the interview to researchers for a certain amount of time, e.g. for ten years after the interviews or until their death. Columbia has also given interviewees the opportunity to edit the transcripts of their interviews and make accessible to researchers only the (sometimes quite heavily edited) transcripts, but not the original audio tapes. Other archives and researchers have been less generous in their interviewees' post-interview influence on the sources - for various philosophical and practical reasons - but the goal is always to respect the wishes of the interviewees and to make them heard (in order to become part of history).

For researchers using PGOH, it is therefore important to establish whether the interviews are restricted in part or in whole and whether permissions need to be obtained from the interviewees, their heirs or their estates. Copyright governs the use of oral histories. Researchers cannot use them for commercial purposes, and the "fair use" rule applies, which prevents researchers from quoting from interviews at length. Copyright laws vary from country to country. Thus, researchers should ask the archivist or librarian how exactly they may use the oral histories under the applicable copyright laws.

### Interview strategies and interviewer training

Historically, the skills and training of oral historians has varied widely (even wildly). Similarly, there is a great variety of interview strategies, which often vary by country or region. For example, in Canada and the United States, oral histories created for archives often employ a life story approach that structures the interview chronologically through the order of questions asked, beginning with: "Where and when were you born?" Folklorists, anthropologists, and continental European oral historians often use a more open life story approach that asks interviewees to tell their life story, leaving it up to the interviewee where to begin and end the story, and then add a phase of follow up questions to the life story (in German sociology connected with Fritz Schütze's narrative interview method; Rieman 2003: no page number). Because of a lack of training facilities, oral history more often than not varies from researcher to researcher more so than from country to country. In most countries, oral history continues to be practiced outside of academia, and even in the United States, the number of oral history courses offered to undergraduate and graduate students is small. Oral history is often not part of required historical methods courses. Thus, the typical experience of many first-time oral historians is that they conduct their interviews with very little or no training, resulting in interviews that suffer from poor audio or video quality, poor questions, or a lack of conceptualization.

Grenke conducted his interviews at a time when oral history was not well known at Canadian universities and hardly accepted as a valid historical re-

search method. It is therefore unlikely that Grenke had any kind of formal training in oral history. That may be the reason why the interviews are not properly introduced: Grenke did not identify himself, the interviewee, or the interview setting (date, place, project). He also did not ask for vital data such as birthplace and birth date. Other people participating in the interview are also not identified. Grenke did, however, have formal training in history, and he had a well-conceptualized research project, namely his Ph.D. dissertation. Before conducting the interviews, Grenke had done extensive archival research, which helped him to ask specific questions of his interviewees.

The interviews were semi-structured, and Grenke began interviews by asking interviewees to talk about their lives in Europe and their migration to Winnipeg. Although he focused his questions on the period before 1920, Grenke was open to letting his interviewees go off on tangents, and several times these tangents went into the time of the Second World War. He seldom asked follow up questions and as soon as narrators had finished their stories, he reeled them back to the time before 1920. Such patience and listening-skills make for valuable interviews, because they allow interviewees to tell the stories they want to share. Throughout the history of oral history, there have been interviewers who have not had the same skills. Several interviewers for the Multicultural History Society of Ontario during the late 1970s and 1980s, for example, either deleted from the tapes what they considered “tangents,” cut off interviewees in mid-sentence, or dominated the interviewing by talking more than the interviewee. Thus, Grenke’s openness to letting interviewees tell their stories was useful for me, because those were the times when interviewees talked about the Second World War (or had an opportunity to talk about it if they wished but chose not to. A narrative interview approach probably would have yielded even more stories.

### Summaries and transcriptions, or: The importance (and sometimes inevitability) of listening to the interviews

Archivists have found that researchers using oral histories often consult only the transcripts and sometimes only the summaries. Seldom do they listen to the interviews. That is a major problem, because researchers miss a great amount of information and are prone to misunderstand and thus misinterpret. They forego basic methodological practice, which they would not do in the case of written sources: if at all possible, they would always go to the original source in order to exclude any mistakes generated by transcription, translation, etc. They would never think of using only an archivist’s summary of, for example, Canadian government administrative instructions or an immigrant’s diary. While it is indeed faster to skim a printed text (i.e. the transcript) than to listen to an audio recording, no researcher would rely solely on a typescript of an

accessible handwritten original only because the fading ink and the author's idiosyncratic handwriting makes for difficult and time-consuming reading.

Summaries, logs, or indexes of interviews are often produced by the interviewers themselves, who will focus on the topics they are interested in. For an interview with Fred Martin, who was born in Dresden around 1895 and immigrated to Winnipeg in 1913, Grenke created an index that included entries focusing mostly on the period before 1920, but it also contained the following entries regarding the Nazi period: "World War II: Discussion of internment [sic] during W.W. II, treated very well. Bully-boys coming interns. Gaining freedom through help of lawyer." "Personalities: [...] 2. Martin Seelheim [...] Positively [sic], Seelheim no supporter of Hitler. 3. Consul Radde came in 1937 - strong supporter of Hitler. Started brewery [sic] and others remained behind to eat it." For my own project on German-Canadians' ways of dealing with the Nazi past, these somewhat cryptic notes would suggest the interview contains little if anything of use. By listening to the interview, however, I found that Martin also talked about German-Canadians' attitudes to Hitler and Nazi Germany during the war, and, most importantly, he developed his own explanation for Hitler's success: this was an excellent example of how one German-Canadian made sense of the Nazi past. I would have missed it had I not taken the time to listen to the interview. Similarly, Grenke's index for an interview with P. Laubenstein had no reference to the Nazi period, but Laubenstein and his wife (who is not mentioned in the index) talked about German-Canadians' and their own attitudes to Hitler, their own son's exemption from military service, and P. Laubenstein's joining of the German Club and his membership throughout the war. Again, valuable evidence I would have missed had I relied only on the index.

Listening to interviews unquestionably takes a great investment of time - as is true of all archival research. There are few historians who have not come out of an archive after a day's work and had nothing to show for. Similarly, a day of listening to interviews may yield nothing. For example, Grenke's interviews with Mr. Matthes and Anna Thiessen did not yield anything even though I had selected them from the larger group of Grenke's interviewees as having potential. But overall, with the help of a general index to Grenke's interviews, his individual interview indexes and listening to the interviews, nine interviews with a total of about 17 hours yielded several stories that I could potentially use for my project. At the same time, I was able to mark various interview extracts for teaching purposes and for other projects I am working on.

### Orality of Data

There is another reason for listening to interviews: their oral character. It is true, as British oral historian Paul Thompson points out, that the encounter between interviewer and interviewee loses some of its complexity by "freezing



speech in a tape recording,” (2000: 126), but, as Thompson argues, the oral recording nevertheless “provides the most accurate document” (2000: 127) of the original interview. It is superior to the transcript, in which the nuances of emotion and the subtleties of meaning conveyed by the spoken word are often lost. The great range of oral cues - the voice’s ever-changing tone, volume, velocity, pitch, and rhythm - cannot be transcribed. Neither can significant pauses, meaningful coughs, and the many forms of laughter be put down on paper. Irony and sarcasm expressed in speech may be misread or not understood at all. Indeed, researchers read the transcript in a certain tone (in their own voice) that may completely misrepresent the spoken word. In 1981, the Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli made a good case for listening to interviews’ oral qualities, but few oral historians followed his advice. Portelli argues that it is the orality of oral sources that make them different from written sources, because oral traits convey “essential narrative functions: they reveal the narrators’ emotions, their participation in the story, and the way the story affected them. This often involves attitudes which speakers may not be able (or willing) to express otherwise, or elements which are not fully within their control” (Portelli 1989: 98). But there is even more to it: a spoken story’s oral traits carry the subjectivity of the interviewee and as such the most important kind of information an oral history can convey. This idea is discussed in more detail below under the heading of subjectivity. Although few researchers are willing or trained to analyze and interpret the orality of interviews, they should nevertheless listen to them to fully understand them. Eventually, it may be the increasing use of audio rather than written records that will make oral historians investigate not only the interviewer-interviewee relationship and their mutual construction of the narrative, but also the relationship between the listener and the interviewee and interviewer. Perhaps because many oral historians see the interviewer and listener as identical, this question has not yet been explored. But with the increasing secondary use of oral histories, researchers/listeners will begin to reflect on their role in the construction of the story they hear and the story they write about what they (believe they have) heard.

#### IV. PGOH As Evidence: Subjectivity, Memory, Retrospectivity

Historians traditionally explicate sources by questioning their internal and external characteristics in order to establish their authenticity and reliability (cf. Schneider and Richardson 1986: chs. 2 and 3). Historians and oral historians have identified subjectivity and memory as major concerns regarding the credibility and usefulness of oral history as evidence (Thompson 2000: chs. 4 and 5; Grele 2006). Although implicitly discussed in the memory debate, I add retrospectivity here as another characteristic of oral history that researchers should consider.

Historians understand a source's subjectivity either as bias (partiality) or an author's specific perspective generated by his or her position in society. Traditionally, historians have viewed subjectivity as a source's weakness, because it makes it less reliable and less true. Historians have considered oral histories to be particularly subjective - suffering from the interviewees' forgetfulness, dishonesty and reticence as well from the interviewer's intentionally or unintentionally misleading questions (Cutler 1984: 79-80) - and therefore to be particularly weak sources (Thompson 2000: 118). Oral historians were therefore forced to grapple with their sources' subjectivity, perhaps more so than other historians. While they pointed out that all sources were inherently subjective, they also explored the specific nature of subjectivity in oral histories. In these discussions, oral historians extended their research into the subjectivity of their interviewees to their own subjectivity in shaping the interview. At the same time, they extended the meanings of subjectivity beyond the interviewee's or the interviewer's bias or perspective. The Italian oral historian Luisa Passerini defined subjectivity as "that area of symbolic activity which includes cognitive, cultural and psychological aspects." Rather than use similar concepts, such as "mentality, ideology, culture, world-view (*Weltanschauung*), and consciousness," she argued that

subjectivity has the advantage of being a term sufficiently elastic to include both the aspects of spontaneous subjective being [...] contained and represented by attitude, behaviour and language, as well as other forms of awareness [...] such as the sense of identity, consciousness of oneself, and more considered forms of intellectual activity. The importance of this term, moreover, is that it embraces not only the epistemological dimension but also that concerned with the nature and significance of the political (Passerini 1979: 85).

Her colleague Alessandro Portelli argues that oral sources are subjective because they are *artificially created* by the historian; the *interviewer shapes* to some degree *the content of the interview* (through questions etc.); a *story changes* with each telling; and oral history *is never complete*, because "it is impossible to exhaust the *entire* historical memory of a single informant" (Portelli 1981: 104).

Thus, oral historians use the term subjectivity as a heuristic device - Passerini even saw it as "a tool of analysis peculiarly appropriate to social history" (1979: 86) - to critically examine their sources. It is the subjectivity of oral history, according to Portelli, that reveals this source's most important information, since it "tells us less about events as such than about their meaning." Of course, interviewees often give us important factual data about the past, especially in the absence of other sources. "But the unique and precious element" of oral history

is the speaker's subjectivity: and therefore, if the research is broad and articulated enough, a cross section of the subjectivity of a social group or class. [Oral sources] tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do,

what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did (1981: 99-100).

Ronald Grele points to the interviewee's interpretation of his or her own life that researchers should investigate:

In all interviews there is a tendency to impose an order on the events discussed. That is what we do as historians. In that sense, when we ask our memorists to recall events, we are asking them to be their own historians, to impose an order, an interpretation (Grele, 1987: 573).

In other words, oral history can tell us how people make sense of the past, but in order to find out, we need to pay attention not only to the content (what is said) but also to the form (how it is said). Researchers interested in facts should therefore always be aware that these facts come wrapped in specific interpretations that are not simply the interviewees' interpretations, but more complex products of the interview. These interpretations, generated in the interplay of memory and performance, give us insight into people's consciousness. Oral historians agree that it is not only individual but also collective subjectivity that can be investigated. Thus, as oral historians "move[d] from issues in social history to cultural studies" during the 1980s (Grele 2006: 62), they explored subjectivity in its various forms, "whether it was memory, ideology, myth, consciousness, identity, desire, or any other such attributes" (Grele 2006: 65).

Subjectivity is closely linked to memory, another problem historians have identified in regards to oral history. Similar to subjectivity, the term memory has many meanings. One useful distinction is that between individual and collective memory. They are closely interlinked. I will focus here on individual memory. Skeptics of oral history argue that individual memory is not trustworthy enough to be considered a credible source, thus, oral sources are more suspicious than other sources. Since the 1970s, oral historians have pointed out the shortsightedness and bias of this argument. Thompson made the case that a lot of sources are based on oral evidence and memory, be it police reports, judicial reports or demographic statistics, which are compiled from a multitude of interviews conducted by census takers or emigration and immigration officers at the border points of exit and entry. Thus, memory is a useful heuristic to question all sources that are based on memory (Thompson 2000: ch. 4). As with subjectivity, oral historians turned what traditional historians saw as a weakness into a strength of the source.

Oral historians have looked to psychology and brain sciences to better understand how individual memory works. They have found that while short-term memory can be very unreliable and easily manipulated, long-term memory often is reliable. While older people may forget names and dates, the process of life review that sets in at a later stage in life allows them to remember the distant past quite clearly. A skillful interviewer will help the interviewee dig deep into his or her memory (Ritchie: 32). That such memories can nevertheless not

be taken at face value but must be cross-checked with other sources and for internal consistency is a given. Oral historians also keep in mind that their own research interests are not a good basis for evaluating an interviewee's memory: "People remember what they think is important, not necessarily what the interviewer thinks is most consequential" (Ritchie: 33). And oral historians know that memories change over time and thus must always be seen in the context of the interviewee's life course. The further an experience lies in the past, the more likely it is that its memory has been smoothly integrated into the life story. Fred H. Allison compared two accounts by an American veteran of the Vietnam war about a specific firefight - one from 1968, two days after the battle, and one from 2002. The short term memory of 1968 was full of disjointed details gathered in the context of a military exit interview. By 2002, there were fewer details, but the story had become coherent (Allison 2004). The two interviews give us different kinds of information. It is only the 2002 interview, however, that tells us what role this experience has played in the veteran's life. As Donald Ritchie explains:

People regularly reevaluate and re-explain their past decisions and actions. [...] [I]ndividuals use the insights gained from current events to reshape them and make new sense out of past experiences. There is nothing invalidating about this reflectivity, so long as interviewers and researchers understand what is occurring and take it into account (Ritchie 2003: 33).

This point takes us to the concept of retrospectivity. Oral history interviews are always about two different time periods, and in the case of the PGOH, researchers often have to consider three different time periods when evaluating the source. The basic idea here is simple: "Oral histories are products of the time of their creation" (Grele, 1987: 572). Thus, oral histories are both about the time the interviewees reminisce about and the time in which they do the reminiscing. Why is this difference between the two times important? Historians distinguish between primary and secondary sources. Primary sources, often called the "raw material" of history, are sources created at the time we study. An article in the *Winnipeg Free Press* from 1904 about a social club of Germans is a primary source for Grenke's study of Germans in pre-WWI Winnipeg. Secondary sources, on the other hand, are sources created *after* the events we study. They are interpretations of the primary sources (Schneider/Cantor 1986: 22-23). By this definition, oral histories (like autobiographies and memoirs) are secondary sources, because they are often created long after the events historians study. Thus, Grenke conducted his interviews in the 1970s, over half a century after the events he writes about. They are products of the 1970s, not the 1890s or 1920s.

Even though in practice, oral histories (like autobiographies) are considered primary sources, they are nevertheless different from other primary sources. One may argue that many sources are created after an event (police reports, newspaper accounts, diary entries, etc.) and thus all are retrospective. But oral

histories, like autobiographies, are often retrospective in a way that should have become clear in the example of Allison's Vietnam veteran. Most oral histories are created not only at a different time but in a different *era* than the events they discuss. Values have changed and interviewees often judge their own actions and thoughts in this new light; hence, in the case of the Allison's interview, the veteran's need in 2002 (but not in 1968) to justify his killing of Vietnamese soldiers. As Portelli and Grele say, oral histories are mostly about the meanings people ascribe to their experiences in the context of their life story. Thus, researchers using PGOH must know not only about the time they study, but also about the time in which the interviews were conducted. As a user of Grenke's oral histories, I must know about the 1890s-1940s to understand what the interviewees talk about and I must know about the 1960s and early 1970s to understand the context in which they recall their memories. After all, Grenke wanted his interviewees to remember their lives before a world war, a depression, another world war, a major German immigration to Winnipeg in the 1950s and the socio-economic decline of the city in the 1960s. All of these intervening events as well as the changing social values potentially shaped the interviewees' memories of the past. Furthermore, listening to the interviews 37 years after they were conducted, I must also consider the present time in order to avoid imposing today's values on the interviewees' stories. I will return to some of these ideas at the end of the next section when I return to a discussion of the Grenke interviews.

## V. Interpreting PGOH: Document and Text

Oral histories can be interpreted from many different perspectives, with different approaches and methods. Even within the pages of this journal in the past few years, approaches ranging from discourse analysis to psychology have been discussed. This section discusses two widely used approaches among oral historians: American oral historian Linda Shopes, who is also the co-editor of Palgrave's series *Studies in Oral History*, distinguishes - based on Grele's work (2007) - between oral historians who use oral histories as documents, i.e. as sources of information about people's past experiences and consciousness, and oral historians who problematize interviews as constructed narratives (Shopes 2008).

When historians use oral histories to reconstruct the past, they usually use all kinds of other sources as well, in part to corroborate the evidence, in part to get at different perspectives of the same events and developments. Orlando Figes's recent study *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (2007) is a superb example of this approach to oral history sources. Figes and his team of researchers collected and preserved the private archives of hundreds of Russian families and interviewed family members. They have made their sources available online at [www.orlandofiges.com](http://www.orlandofiges.com). The beautifully written book recon-

structs on the basis of these sources the everyday life of Russians from different social backgrounds during the reign of Stalin. He argues convincingly that under Stalin, Russians' lives and, more importantly, their consciousness, changed dramatically: As informants to the state and as people afraid to say out loud what they thought, they became "whisperers."

Alessandro Portelli, on the other hand, equally masterfully uses oral histories and other sources in his study *The Order Has Been Carried Out: History, Memory, and Meaning of a Nazi Massacre in Rome* (2003) to investigate the German army's murder of 335 men at the Fosse Ardeatine, caves outside of Rome. Portelli explores not only what actually happened, but more importantly, how Romans have remembered this event and why they have remembered it in a particular way: namely as a Nazi reprisal for a partisan attack, a reprisal that could have been avoided if the partisans had surrendered. Portelli's meticulous research shows that the German command had the prisoners shot to death within 24 hours of the partisan attack. He documents through a multitude of voices how memories of this event have not only divided Italian society and families, but how individual men and women have been tortured by their divided memories.

Both Figes and Portelli are interested in consciousness, but take different approaches. Figes focuses on the past, i.e. Russians' consciousness during Stalin's reign. Only in his closing chapter does he look at how Russians have remembered the Stalin era since Stalin's death in 1956. Portelli, on the other hand, interweaves past and present consciousness or collective memory throughout the story he tells. Similarly, while Figes includes a note on method at the end of the book but is otherwise silent about his sources, Portelli problematizes his oral sources throughout his book. Both authors reconstruct the past in part as an intervention in the two countries' ongoing politics of memory around the legacies of Stalinism and fascism. Both tend to heroize their narrators, but only Portelli dares to ask why some of his interviewees, especially those from the political Left and the working class, remember the right-wing, anti-partisan, and demonstrably false version of these events. Both studies, in their own ways, use oral histories in a sophisticated and exemplary fashion.

I finish this discussion of explicating and interpreting oral history with a brief example from the Grenke interviews. Fred Martin was born in Dresden, Germany around 1895 and immigrated to Canada in 1913, the year that saw the largest number of immigrants in the country's history. Martin settled in the boomtown of Winnipeg, where a friend helped him get a job. In the interview Grenke conducted with Martin in 1971, Martin recalled mostly the time during and after the First World War, when he lost his job, worked on a farm, and went back and forth between Winnipeg and Dresden. He also talked about the 1930s and 1940s, when he established himself and founded a family. One of the interview topics was that of the two German consuls in Winnipeg during the 1930s, Heinrich Seelheim (1930-1937) and Wilhelm Rodde (1937-1939).

Martin described Seelheim as a good man whom he knew personally. Asked whether Seelheim was a supporter of Hitler, Martin said:

Oh no. No. No, he was-- Well, officially. What can you do officially? As a consul? Can you go against him [Hitler], you know? No. Because if that had been, he would have never gone to Tokyo as consul. No, he knew what to say and how much to say and the other one [Hitler] you had to know. Some things Hitler saw alright and sometimes he was crazy. We all know that today. Many Canadians admired him for certain things. A man who can win over one hundred million people must have something. He can't be totally stupid. But he could become stupid by having too much power.

My own interview with a German immigrant who was a young man in Winnipeg at the time and whose family had also had personal contact with Seelheim, corroborates Martin's statement that Seelheim was not a Nazi. We know from the historian Jonathan Wagner, however, that Seelheim "experienced an early Nazi conversion and in May 1934 joined the NSDAP" (Wagner 1976/77). He actively promoted Nazi ideology in western Canada, in part by founding a Nazi newspaper. Seelheim was "a real anti-Semite and thorough racial dogmatist" who informed on German-Canadian communists and their relatives in Germany (Wagner 1982: 38).

Why then did Martin (and other German immigrants) remember Seelheim as a non-Nazi? Subjectivity, memory, and retrospectivity help explicate Martin's statement. Martin had a clear factual memory of Seelheim: He correctly remembered his name, position, the year he left Winnipeg, and specific encounters he had had with him and his wife. Hence, this is not a case of faulty recollection. It also seems unlikely that Martin would have depicted Seelheim in any other way if it had been a different interviewer or a different interview situation: He was generally cautious about speaking about Nazism, but in this case, his initial reaction to Grenke's question was spontaneous and forceful. His following defence of Seelheim's "official" actions suggests, however, not only a continued loyalty to Seelheim but also an awareness that his statement needed further explanation. Events in the same time period may have shaped his memory of Seelheim. Martin knew Seelheim's successor, Wilhelm Rodde, whom he remembered as "a very, very strong believer in Hitler" who "had fights all the time with his church and with the newspaper editors and so forth and so on. He was not liked." This sentiment is corroborated by Wagner. Unlike Dr. Seelheim, Rodde had only basic education and no diplomatic training. Lacking "the personal charm of Seelheim, the SS man Rodde appeared both publicly and privately during his time in Winnipeg as an inflexible, arrogant, and overbearing Nazi" who "did not restrict himself to anti-Semitism. Like many radical Nazis, he also attacked Christians, as his public denunciation of Archbishop Sinnott of Winnipeg in 1938 indicated" (42-43). It thus perhaps not too surprising that Martin remembered Rodde but not Seelheim as a supporter of Hitler.

As Portelli argues, "'wrong' tales [...] are so very valuable" because "errors, inventions, and myths lead us through, and beyond facts to their meanings," i.e.

to the teller's interests, dreams, and desires (1991: 2). The larger historical context helps explain why Martin wanted to remember Seelheim in this particular way. Until the end of the war, the Canadian government, mass media and public clearly distinguished between Nazis and Germans, and only from 1938/39 onward did Canadians perceive Nazis as unambiguously bad (Lorenzkowski 1998: 169; Young 1999). Until the war, many German-Canadians "perceived fascism as a synonym for renewed self-esteem" (Lorenzkowski 1998: 170). They were particularly taken by the Nazis' ideas about the German *Volk* and *Volksgemeinschaft*, because it helped them feel part of Hitler's "new Germany." In this view, it may be easier to understand why German-Canadians in Winnipeg, whether they knew Seelheim personally or not, may have had a different understanding of Nazism. A Nazi for them was not necessarily a card-carrying member of the Nazi party, but someone who was not a good person. And Nazi was not someone who, like Seelheim, expressed support for the Nazis' *völkisch* ideas.

Martin's memory of Seelheim indicates that his own views were sympathetic to Nazism. This is corroborated by other statements in the interview. Although the German Days were political demonstrations for Nazi Germany, with Hitler salute, and Swastika flags, and pro-Nazi speeches, Martin remembered them as innocent family picnics. He was also one of 847 German Canadians arrested and interned during the war. Germans were usually only interned if they were members of a Nazi organization such the German Bund Canada. Perhaps, then, Martin did not remember Seelheim as a Nazi because he did not consider himself a Nazi. Thus, Martin's statement is biased in two ways. First, Martin may have also felt a need to reaffirm an old friendship as a valuable part of his own life. Depicting Seelheim as a Nazi would have thus devalued his own identity. Second, his benign and narrow view of Nazism made him perceive Seelheim (and himself) as good Germans rather than bad Nazis.

Finally, Martin's memory was shaped in part by the time of the interview. After the war, especially as news from the liberated death camps arrived in Canada, the distinction between 'Germans' and 'Nazis' began to crumble. By the 1960s, public and published Canadian discourse used 'German' and 'Nazi' interchangeably. A large group of German-Canadians experienced this discourse as discomfiting. They perceived it as a constant reminder of the "collective guilt" of the German people. It was therefore vital for German-Canadians to keep the distinction between Germans and Nazis alive (Freund 2006, 2008). This context shaped Martin's memory of Seelheim. His defense of Seelheim's "official" actions was also a defense of his own actions: Seelheim, like other Germans, could not do anything against the madman Hitler. He, like all Germans and even Canadians, was tricked by the good things the Nazis did.

The Grenke interviews do not provide sufficient evidence to reconstruct the German-Canadian community's understanding of the Nazi period from the 1930s to the 1960s. But Fred Martin's interview suggests aspects that need to



be further explored. “The discrepancy between fact and memory,” Portelli writes, is “actively and creatively generated by memory and imagination in an effort to make sense of crucial events and of history in general” (1991: 26). Martin’s memory of Seelheim was such an instance. It was an example of how some German-Canadians in Winnipeg made sense not only of the past but also of the pressing needs of the present.

## VI. Research Questions and Availability and Accessibility of PGOH

Most of the research questions as well as information about the availability of PGOH has been mentioned in the previous sections, so the following is only a brief summary. Despite sophisticated oral history theory, much of what is published continues to take oral history too much at face value. Researchers using oral histories should always ask at least the one question historians ask (or should ask) of all their sources: Why did the author or narrator make this particular statement at this particular place and time? It is this basic attitude of skepticism that Canadian historian Ged Martin finds often lacking among his colleagues. Referring to a 1963 sex scandal in Great Britain, which led to the resignation of War Minister John Profumo, Martin explains historians should more often recall the words of Marilyn Rice-Davies, an eighteen-year-old model with intimate connections to Britain’s political elite. According to Martin, “Mandy was accused of exaggerating her claims to familiarity with influential public figures. When it was put to her that one of her alleged sexual partners denied that he had ever been to bed with her, she disarmingly replied, ‘Well he would, wouldn’t he?’” In Martin’s view, Rice-Davies showed “an element of disbelief that has been notably lacking in the uncritical pages of Canadian history textbooks” (Martin 2004: 29-30). As trivial as it may sound, Martin is spot-on with this critique of his colleagues (and not just in Canada; cf. Thompson 2000: 119).

Oral histories are usually held at libraries or archives, be they private or public, national or local. Australia and Canada have national online inventories that help in the search for oral histories on specific topics or with specific people. In the Canadian case, however, the *Guide* has not been updated since 1993. And these guides, of course, are never complete, because there are many more oral history interviews that have never been put into archives and are instead rotting in people’s basements and attics. Thus, researchers should rely not only on public repositories. Increasingly, interviews are digitized, especially in the United States and Australia, and become more easily accessible.

## VII. Conclusion

Oral histories as process-generated data offer a rich pool of data that can and should be analyzed and interpreted from various perspectives and with a view to interviews' multiple layers of meaning. The form of the source is as important as its content, and the two cannot be separated (cf. White 1987). If we consider the usefulness of archived interviews, it may be fruitful for social scientists to reconsider the common practice of using low-quality recording technology and destroying interviews after the conclusion of the project.

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