

**ORAL HISTORY  
AND  
ETHNIC HISTORY**



**Alexander Freund**

**THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION**

**IMMIGRATION AND ETHNICITY  
IN CANADA SERIES**

**BOOKLET NO. 32**

**Editor**  
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the Canadian Historical Association  
Ottawa, 2014

Published by the  
Canadian Historical Association  
with the support of the  
Department of Canadian Heritage,  
Government of Canada

ISSN: 2292-7441  
ISBN: 978-0-88798-281-1  
ISSN: 2292-745X (online)

Cover Page Illustration  
Dr. Lillian Petroff interviewing  
Macedonian Canadian artist,  
Foto S. Tomov, Toronto, 1977.

Photographer: Ben Lechtman.  
Courtesy of the Multicultural  
History Society of Ontario

Design and Layout by Tony Di Iorio

Printed by Bradda Printing Services Inc.

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Alexander Freund<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

“Undoubtedly the best source for the study of the cluster of motives which led to the decision to migrate and for recording the details of the crossing is the immigrant himself,” so wrote Canadian immigration historian Robert F. Harney in the late 1970s. Harney’s idea of going beyond government documents and other written sources directly to the immigrant was not new. In Canada, there was a long tradition of recording and archiving voices. Long forgotten by the time Harney wrote was Robert Sellar’s history of Huntington County, Quebec, published in 1888 and based, for a lack of written documents, on interviews with over 300 early settlers. In the early twentieth century, folklorists recorded indigenous oral tradition and singing for the Canadian Geological Survey (later National Museum of Canada) and in the interwar and war periods, the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission recorded experiences from the front in Europe. In the United States, Florian Znaniecki and William I. Thomas had based their early twentieth-century study of Polish peasant migrants in the Atlantic world on rich autobiographical sources, and American anthropologists suggested in the 1930s that interviews, next to observation and other documentary evidence, constituted a major “technique” for the study of acculturation. Indeed, German researcher Heinz Lehmann had done just that when he travelled through Canada during the 1930s to observe and interview countless German immigrants to write their history. From Thomas to Harney, oral history – asking men and women about their lived experiences – was at the heart of writing immigration and ethnic history.

From the beginning, ethnic historians, just like other social historians as well as folklorists, anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists, and archivists viewed oral history with great hope. Oral testimony could provide answers where other sources were silent or simply did not exist. Freed from the limits of government documents, researchers could ask the migrants themselves “how it actually was.” Oral interviews provided new sources that could be mined for factual information, be it on living and working conditions in different locales or on institutions such as churches, singing clubs, or mutual aid societies. They also provided new perspectives on events such as labour strikes in which immigrant

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workers were involved. Ethnic historians appreciated the diversity of sometimes conflicting perspectives of members of different ethnic groups, women and men, or differently skilled workers.

This enthusiasm for oral history as both a method and a source led to a number of important initiatives beginning in the 1950s: researchers and archivists collected thousands of interviews with tens of thousands of hours of recorded voices that added new perspectives “from below” to the traditional top-down history that focused on the writings of political, military, and economic elites. While Canadian audiences listened to CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) broadcasters Imbert Orchard and Bill McNeil’s oral history interviews with pioneers or watched “cinema direct” – a new form of documentary film employed by Pierre Perrault, Michel Brault and Arthur Lamothe – folklorist Helen Creighton interviewed hundreds of people in the Atlantic provinces and Carmen Roy asked hundreds of Canadians about popular medicine and legends. The Canadian Museum of Civilization, the Library and Archives of Canada as well as several federal departments such as National Defense and Fisheries and Oceans started oral history programs during the 1940s and 1950s. In the early 1960s, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation initiated large oral history programs with radio pioneers, veterans of the First World War and the Spanish Civil War, and musicians. Several professional associations also set up oral history projects. These and many other projects are held in archives throughout Canada and are inventoried in the Canadian Oral History Association’s online Guide to Oral History Collections in Canada (<http://oralhistorycentre.ca/archival-records>).

Most oral history research on immigrant and ethnic groups in North America did not begin until the 1960s, an era which saw the rise of social history as a way of understanding ‘ordinary’ peoples lives of the past. Although Canadian historians, archivists, and journalists had compiled a rich archive of immigrants’ oral testimonies since the 1930s and especially since the 1950s, few had published their research findings. During the 1960s, social historians began to embrace oral history as a method to find out about immigrants’, women’s, and workers’ experiences. Next to the challenges of working with a new method and on new topics, they had to respond to their colleagues’ skepticism of oral and memory sources, which many considered unreliable (because eyewitnesses forgot, misremembered, embellished, or lied) or trivial (“a vast mass of trash,” in American historian Barbara Tuchman’s words) and therefore of little use. Thus, Harney’s was an important call to arms. It was heeded by many local historians, inspired by the Swedish “dig where you stand” movement, and social historians, who strove to write “history from the bottom up.” These scholars were beginning to research the histories of “their” communities. A new cohort of ethnic scholars emerged, often immigrants themselves or children of immigrants, who were motivated by multi-cultured values and supported by official Multiculturalism policy and funding. They embarked on projects to interview Italian, German,

Finnish, Ukrainian, Jewish, Japanese, Caribbean and many other immigrant women and men to find out about the old country, the overseas passage, and the years and decades of settlement, acculturation and integration.

Recording and archiving immigrants' oral histories took off in the 1970s. The focus on creating archival collections was influenced by the American development of oral history as an archival practice, and thus much impetus and guidance for creating oral histories came from public archivists. At the same time, Canadian oral historians tended to focus more on the aural aspects of oral history. In several major archives in the United States, such as Columbia University's Oral History Research Office, audio recordings were destroyed after they had been transcribed. The edited transcripts were considered the original document. In Canada, the preservation of audio recordings was emphasized, and interviews less often transcribed.

The largest project and one of the most important collections of oral histories with immigrants and their descendants was that of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario. The MHSO was co-founded by Harney in 1976 and financed by a one-time grant from the Province of Ontario. In the first volume of the Society's journal, *Polyphony*, Harney wrote that the Society "was formed by scholars, civil servants, archivists, and librarians who saw a need for a special programme to preserve and record the province's ethnic history." The founders hoped "to insure the survival of as full a record as possible of immigration to Ontario, ethnicity, the old country origins of our people, and the historical experience of all groups in the province." MHSO cooperated with the Archives of Ontario and the Multicultural Development Branch of the Ministry of Culture and Recreation. The Society quickly hired up to fifty paid and volunteer community researchers who conducted nearly 3,900 interviews with over 5,100 hours of recordings between 1976 and 1987. By 2013, the collection included over 9,000 hours of interviews with about 4,500 members of sixty ethnocultural and indigenous groups. Nearly 1,500 interviews had been digitized and of those, 650 had full transcripts. The MHSO was set to launch a digital archive in late 2014.

The oral histories in the MHSO collection are of uneven quality. Some of the early interviews, conducted in the first five years of the Society, suffered from a lack of interviewer training. A great number of interviews conducted with German-Canadians in the late 1970s and early 1980s, for example, are of disappointingly poor quality. None of the interviews were transcribed, and some of the taped recordings were heavily edited rather than left intact. All interviews are accompanied by one-page logs with one-paragraph descriptions. Entries that describe the "length of interview" as "3 hours (20 minutes of tape)" are unfortunately not uncommon. In some cases, questions were deleted, in other cases, answers that were considered "tangents" were deleted. In some cases, the narrators' answers were deleted and then summarized, on tape, by the

interviewer. Even when the interviews were left intact, some interviewers tended to interrupt, impose their own opinions, talk at length about their own experiences, or ask leading questions. Yet, other interviews are of very good quality, at least to the extent that short one-session interviews allow interviewers to build rapport and narrators to go into any detail. These disappointing results were due in part to a lack of training of the early volunteer interviewers. As Cathy Leekam, program manager at MHSO wrote in 2012, “at that stage there were no standardized interview guidelines or codes of practice to control the process or editing of recorded interviews. We haven’t found any record that explains why portions of the interviews were deleted; that is not common practice at the MHSO, and certainly not something we would expect to find in the collection!” The Society responded to such uneven results by training interviewers and publishing an interviewing guide in 2002, which it is currently expanding and updating.

National and provincial archives and museums also began to collect oral history interviews with immigrants. Between 1955 and 1979, the Canadian Museum of Civilization conducted hundreds of interviews with indigenous peoples as well as Canadians of African, Anglo, Arab, Bulgarian, Caribbean, Chinese, Croatian, Danish, Estonian, Filipino, Finnish, French, Gaelic, German, Hungarian, Icelandic, Irish, Italian, Jewish, Korean, Latvian, Macedonian, Mennonite, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Rumanian, Russian, Serbian, Slovak, Scottish, Turkish, Ukrainian, and Welsh heritage. Similarly, the Library and Archives Canada holds large collections of interviews with immigrants from across the country.

In the Atlantic provinces, folklorists conducted numerous interviews to document vernacular culture, folklore, music, and work experiences. In Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, between 1961 and 1990, the Beaton Institute collected oral histories with Micmacs and members of twenty ethnocultural groups. In Quebec, the Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture held annual life history competitions between 1981 and 1986 and collected hundreds of life stories of Quebecers born before the First World War. In Montreal and Winnipeg, several groups began collecting interviews with Jewish refugees in the early 1970s. In Ontario, along with the MHSO, dozens of societies, archives, libraries, and projects interviewed “early settlers and pioneers” and members of ethnocultural groups. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, David Millar interviewed 36 Winnipeggers about the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike and life in early twentieth century Western Canada, while Arthur Grenke focused his interviews on the experience of German immigrants in pre-World War One Winnipeg. M. V. Caola interviewed German and Russian Canadians in the Prairie West for the Canadian Museum of Civilization in the early 1970s about life “in the old country, immigration, and early settlement” as well as “customs, religion, education and communism. Folksongs and instrumental music are also included.” Among many oral history projects in Manitoba, in a project for Brandon Public Library between 1980 and

1986, early pioneers “recounted the history of their areas. Topics include personal family histories, community histories, church and school histories and activities, early farm life, hospitals and health care, war brides, transportation, politics, sports history (baseball, hockey, curling).” The late Michael Ewanchuk began interviews with Ukrainian immigrants in Manitoba in the 1930s and recorded eighty interviews between 1972 and 1992.

There was activity in Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia as well. During the 1970s, the Saskatchewan Archives, for example, interviewed 721 Americans, Chinese, Doukhobors, Francophones, Hungarians, Italians, Jews, Mennonites, Norwegians, Poles, Rumanians, Scandinavians, South-East Asians and Ukrainians. During the 1980s and early 1990s, they added at least another 500 interviews with immigrants and refugees from dozens of different ethnic groups as well as with Metis and indigenous groups. In Airdrie, Alberta, Stephen Wilk collected 20 interviews with pioneers between 1962 and 1965. J. H. Brunvand interviewed Norwegian Canadians in Alberta in 1972 and 1973 to find out about language problems and children's attitudes towards their heritage culture. From 1977 to 1981, Edith Woolliams collected 50 interviews with pioneers of Nose Creek Valley near Calgary about rural pioneer and community life and agriculture. The Matsqui Sumas Abbotsford (B.C.) Museum Society conducted 108 interviews with “early settlers” between 1970 and 1986. Narrators talked about major local and regional events such as floods as well as local agriculture, logging, clay extraction, schools, community life and Sto:lo.

## **DEFINITIONS AND DEBATES ABOUT ORAL HISTORY**

Oral history is popularly understood to mean the history that – unlike *written* history – is passed from one generation to the next through oral storytelling. In academic use, however, this intergenerational transfer of experiences, memories, and stories is commonly described as oral tradition or, more recently, collective or social memory. Oral history, on the other hand, is defined (at least in most academic usage) as a person’s life story that focuses on personal experience. Oral tradition is often associated with indigenous peoples, and it is true that oral tradition is particularly important for oral societies. It would be misleading, however, to create a dichotomy of indigenous oral tradition vs. non-indigenous oral history. While all cultural groups have oral traditions, as folklorists have demonstrated, both indigenous and non-indigenous people also tell stories about themselves, especially in contemporary societies that are based on an individualistic concept of the self. Indeed, oral history and oral tradition intersect at important points. In telling stories about their life experiences and life worlds, people draw on oral traditions, often sub-consciously, to make sense of their lives. A definitional distinction between oral history and oral tradition is

nevertheless useful, because oral history is a multi-faceted term, even if we leave oral tradition out of the equation.

Oral history has come to describe at least four different things: a method, a source, a product/publication, and a social movement. Oral history is the **method** that seeks to create an archival source, namely an interview with a person about his or her lived experiences. Methodological questions are often at the centre of oral historians' discussions in workshops, guidebooks, and online forums such as H-OralHist, focusing on interviewing techniques and recording equipment. Oral historians conduct topical interviews or life history interviews. Topical interviews may focus on a specific event, for example, a migrant's passage overseas; or on a certain period or life phase, such as an immigrant's first few years of settlement; or on a topic, such as a migrant labourer's work and union experiences. Life history interviews attempt to record a complete life history – a story that focuses on the interviewee's personal experiences but may stretch back to memories about his parents and grandparents and will often include ruminations about the interviewee's general view of life and the world around her.

Topical and life history interviews are structured to varying degrees, but they are generally described as semi-structured. Interviewers do not use a questionnaire where one question follows another in the same consistent order. Rather, they use an interview guide – a compilation of topics and questions they wish to touch on during an interview. Experienced interviewers know their own guide by heart and do not have to refer to it during an interview. Harney developed a lengthy interview guide that interviewers at the MHSO used in their interviews. It included over 120 topics that covered the migrants' experiences from life in the old country, local and international migrations, the journey across the Atlantic and early settlement in Canada, neighbourhood descriptions, work experiences, ethnic institutions, family and community life, world views and motivations. Topical interviews are often semi-structured, where the interviewer will ask questions in a roughly chronological order. Life histories, on the other hand, are sometimes conducted in two phases. In a first phase, the interviewee is simply asked to tell his life story. In my own experience, results vary greatly, from a brief five-minute statement to an elaborate fifteen-hour narrative over the course of several sessions and days. Most interviewees take between 30 minutes and three hours to tell their life story. In a second phase, the interviewer follows up with questions that ask for details, examples, and elaborations. In either case, oral historians strive to establish rapport and a trusting relationship with the interviewee and to enter into a dialogue about the interviewee's life. They understand that the "dialogical narrative" – to use the words of Ronald Grele – they collect is shaped by many factors, including the interviewer and her relationship with the narrator.

Diverse interviewing methods result in a range of **archival sources**. Oral history interviews may be an hour long or ten or one hundred, conducted over one or several sessions in the course of a day or several weeks, months, or even years. Many interviews are between one and three hours long, recorded over one or two sessions. The MHSO conducted topical interviews that lasted, depending on a great degree on the interviewer, from a few minutes to several hours. Most interviews in collections of provincial archives and the Canadian Museum of Civilization were about one hour long, but much depended on the purpose of the project. Oral history interviews for biographies, for example, often stretched over many hours and were conducted over the span of months and even years. Extensive life histories have been much less common, for several reasons. Life histories are more labour intensive and thus fewer people can be interviewed. Although historians do not generally attempt to use oral histories to make statistically representative generalizations, they nevertheless prefer sample sizes that show a great diversity of experiences and that allow them to identify historical patterns. They have therefore tended to conduct one- or two-session topical interviews with between ten and one hundred interviewees.

Yet, there is great value in extensive life history interviewing. The life histories that Stanley H. Scott and his colleagues conducted in British Columbia in 1975 are still exemplary. They worked with a ten page-long guide with hundreds of topics to investigate the “social and cultural relationships within the West Kootenays.” They focused on the experiences of immigrants from England, Italy, and Russia by interviewing nine people: three family members representing three generations from the three ethnic groups. They asked how individuals viewed their group’s past, how they related to social and institutional changes, and how families changed through three generations. In terms of their ethnic self-identification, loyalty to old world customs and traditions, and their views of work, success, and morality, there were greater differences between generations than between ethnic groups. The researchers also found differences between the ethnic groups, for instance in their expectations of educational achievements, which were highest among the Russian immigrants. Scott’s interviewees spoke for between sixteen and thirty hours.

While interviewing methods often overlap significantly between oral history and social sciences, there are diverse approaches to analyzing and interpreting the data or stories. More significantly, while most social scientists destroy their interviews, most historians archive theirs. Archiving, however, has been a fundamental part of oral history practice since its beginnings, both in Canada and the United States. One aspect of this archiving is that while social scientists usually anonymize their “respondents,” oral historians seek their interviewees’ consent to use their real names. Thus, while oral history can be considered a form of qualitative interviewing, not all qualitative interviewing can be

considered oral history. In other words, oral history is not synonymous with interviewing or storytelling.

In most cases, a choice of method and the resultant source leads to a **product or publication** – the third aspect of oral history. Edited transcripts, book-length biographies based on interviews, and monographs substantively relying on oral history interviews are also often referred to as oral histories. During the 1960s and 1970s, historians who used oral sources developed new ways of representing their research findings. Once social historians realized how oral history allowed them to write the history of women, workers, indigenous peoples, ethnic groups and immigrants, they began to re-write traditional history with the political goal of changing society. They often put the voices of those they had interviewed front and centre in their history books. While some used short quotes from many interviewees, others, for example Rolf Knight, who interviewed his German immigrant mother, provided extensive edited transcripts of the interviews, letting his mother tell her life history in her own words.

Archivists, historians, journalists, and other researchers were often drawn to oral history because it allowed them to tie the creation and preservation of historical sources and the writing of history to their personal political goal of making society more inclusive of women, immigrants, and workers. Oral history, they argued, helped them to democratize history by writing marginalized groups into the historical canon. For those working outside of institutions such as archives and universities, oral history provided an intuitive method of doing historical research. Crossing the threshold into an archive or a university for many was more intimidating than interviewing an older relative or neighbour about her life. For them, oral history democratized the making of history; it gave people who were not formally trained historians the tools to research and write their own history. Thus, a diverse group of people embraced oral history with great enthusiasm. This enthusiasm has generated a worldwide **social movement**, often working at a grassroots level, outside of academia, in history workshops, but also through national and international associations, meetings, and publications. Canadian oral historians participated in this movement, founding the Canadian Oral History Association (COHA) in 1974 and publishing their research in the association's journal, the *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale*.

Oral history, then, appealed to social historians and archivists, because it gave them a flexible research method for creating knowledge and archival sources for the study of the past. These sources allowed them to include the perspective of those who had hitherto been ignored by historians and archivists and thus to present a fuller portrait of the past. They explored new ways of writing history, which they tied to the political goal of creating a more inclusive society.

Researchers and archivists, however, were also skeptical of oral history. People's memories were faulty, and people tended to exaggerate, misremember, forget, and even lie about the past. Much of what common people had to say, some historians argued, was trivial and therefore useless in their attempt to understand the socio-economic forces that shaped social relations. There were also practical problems. Many interviews were conducted on shoestring budgets, without sufficient preparation and without the means of archiving them. Thus, thousands of recorded cassette tapes landed in shoeboxes in basements and attics, never to be heard (from) again. Even those interviews that made it into the archives were at times of poor or at least dubious quality. Too often, interviewers were ill-prepared and untrained. They did not understand that simply asking people for their stories, or asking a battery of questions in the style of a survey, was not enough to record a high-quality interview of lasting value.

Archivists and researchers began to address these concerns, in part by establishing institutions such as COHA and in part by developing theory-based analyses of oral sources. From the late 1970s on, researchers working with oral testimonies began to develop theoretically informed approaches to the challenges posed by their informants' storytelling. Much of this new thinking about oral testimony and memory as a form of evidence came from outside of Canada, particularly from the United States, Great Britain, and Italy. Much also came from outside of the discipline of history, from folklore and ethnographic studies as well as critical theory, including feminist and postcolonial research. Rather than viewing subjectivity, for example, as a weakness, it was re-evaluated as a site where people lived not only in a material world but engaged in culture, sometimes understood as a system of symbols. Narrators' use of cultural symbolism directed researchers to interpret meaning beyond its literal sense. Oral historians, following the work of Edward Ives, Ronald J. Grele, Alessandro Portelli, Luisa Passerini, and others began to turn to literary theory to unpack the multiple meanings their interviewees constructed in the telling of their tales.

As oral historians and ethnic historians participated in this "linguistic turn" and its investigation of how language shapes our perceptions and representations of the world, they also became increasingly interested in the concept of narrative and theories of narrativity. Next to literary scholars, they drew on the work of cognitive psychologists, who argued that narrative is fundamental to the forming and continual re-forming of identities and memories. Narrative analysis became a major method for interpreting oral histories. Oral historians argued that people's narratives were not a transparent window onto past realities, but rather constructions of identity that were embedded in social relations of power. They asked, for example, what Italian immigrant women in postwar Vancouver and Toronto meant when they self-identified as "rebels" or as "strong women" doing "hard work." Oral historians further complicated oral sources by arguing that

interviewers, rather than being detached and neutral extractors of data, were deeply entangled in the constructions of the stories they recorded.

An interest in language, narrative, and identity also led oral historians to more complex uses of the concept of memory. Oral historians working in the field of ethnic history employed diverse memory theories to better contextualize the stories they heard. Cognitive psychology and neurological sciences moved away from a simplistic understanding of memory as a computer-like hard drive that could store and recall data. Memory, it is now argued, is a constructive process. Forgetting is no longer seen as a defective memory but rather as constitutive of memory itself. We must forget, not simply in order to remember but also in order to function as human beings.

While the normal functioning of memory helps us explain certain silences in people's stories about themselves and the world around them, oral historians have become particularly sensitive to the silences in stories of surviving trauma. Refugees have often experienced traumatic events or prolonged traumatization in captivity. Silences about experiences of individual and systemic violence are at times reinforced by the receiving society that does not wish to hear stories of trauma. Whether in Germany, Israel, the United States or Canada, Holocaust survivors' testimonies began to be "heard" by a wider public only three decades after the end of the war. Similarly, German refugee women's stories of mass rape in the wake of the Second World War were told, ever so cautiously, only by a few and only many decades later. In my own research working with more recent Central American refugees, I have found that yet another form of silence is induced by a system of refugee and citizenship policy that does not allow refugees to tell their "whole story" for fear of deportation. Finally, in many of the ethnic "communities" we study, intergenerational silences about past atrocities and the ongoing effects of traumatic memories on the next generations destabilize families and fragment communities.

Other researchers have embodied memory, asking how our bodies, our flesh, remember the past. Historian Joy Parr, for example, has studied how people's sense of themselves that was rooted in a specific place and space became dislodged when they were forced to relocate their homes – a fruitful field of investigation that immigration historians have yet to tackle. This interest in the body is linked to investigations of oral history as performance, by both interviewee and interviewer. Oral historians have not only deconstructed the oral history document as a performance, but also looked to performance as a means of disseminating their research results. Cambodian Canadian Chantria Tram interweaves autobiographical and family memories with interview excerpts in her dramatic play *Someone Between*. The Montreal Life Stories project partnered with PlayBack Theatre to explore how actors work with oral histories. In Winnipeg, actress Deborah Paterson has written and performed the play *Sargent*

*and Victor & Me*; based on first-person accounts, it tells of change in the area around the intersection of Sargent Avenue and Victor Street, from a neighbourhood that was the “heart of Winnipeg’s Icelandic community” to “a place of violent crime and ruthless street-gang activity.”

Over the past three decades, ethnic historians who base their research on oral history have acknowledged that their sources are narrative constructions of past realities that are shaped as much by people’s past experiences as by present needs and expectations of the future. The stories people tell about their lives are as much constructions of the present as are the stories we as historians write about the past. American oral historian Ronald J. Grele has put this most succinctly: “When we ask people to sit for an oral history interview, we ask them to become historians. We ask them to recall a set of events and put those events together in some form of a story or narrative, and in that way interpret those events and explain the process of change over time.”

Despite such turns to theories of memory and narrative, experience nevertheless weighs heavy in historians’ judgment of evidence. Thus, after leaving behind the theoretical complications in their introductions, historians often return to using oral histories in less complicated ways. This pragmatic approach is true of most historians’ work, as they explore the connections linking past realities with the stories they hear and tell.

What then are the best ways to use oral history in the study of Canada’s ethnic groups? In the following two sections, I present diverse approaches pursued in the past and outline some of the common challenges associated with the use of oral sources. These include first, questions about the reliability of oral sources, especially in regards to memory, subjectivity, and truthfulness as well as the selection of narrators and the associated questions of representation: specifically, how do we ‘let immigrants tell their stories.’ Second, how do historians take into account the role of the interviewer in the construction of a narrator’s life story, especially in regard to the interviewer-interviewee relationship and the position of an interviewer as an insider or outsider to the community he researches? To put it more bluntly, if the interviewer-historian partakes in the shaping of their narrators’ life stories, can ‘immigrants tell their stories’?

## **LETTING IMMIGRANTS TELL THEIR STORIES**

The relationship in Canada between oral history and the study of ethnic groups is shaped by different but mutually stimulating interests. Archivists, journalists, and oral historians have at times sought to document the experiences of immigrants and, less often, those of their children and grandchildren. Historians of ethnicity

and immigration turned to oral sources only later on and often approached them reluctantly and with hesitation or trepidation. Archivists often focused on creating oral sources for archival purposes, to fill gaps in their collections. Journalists sometimes interviewed dozens and even hundreds of people to get their “stories.” Barry Broadfoot, for example, interviewed European immigrants who arrived in Canada after the Second World War and compiled excerpts to tell the story of postwar immigration. Myrna Kostash interviewed her generation, the children of Ukrainian immigrants to the prairies, in the mid-1970s. She sparked controversy and discussion in the Ukrainian-Canadian community as she dismantled the first-generation ethnic gatekeepers’ hagiographic myth of a Ukrainian-Canadian success story and exposed the economic and ideological splits within the community and the discrimination Ukrainian-Canadians had suffered. In 2000, Ivaylo Grouev drew attention to the experiences of global refugees in Canada by publishing eighteen of their stories. Kenneth Bagnell used oral histories and other autobiographical sources to write popular histories of Italian-Canadians (1989) and immigrant orphans from Britain (2001).

Straddling the line between history and fiction, journalist Susan Gabori (1993) took this one step further. Calling it “oral history put into dramatic format,” she wove excerpts of interviews with several dozen Italian immigrants in Toronto into the saga of the Pace “family,” a composite based on one family but amplified and extended through experiences and stories from other interviewees. As another example, several of the fifty-two episodes in the film documentary series *A Scattering of Seeds: The Creation of Canada* (1997), used oral history interviews to tell the stories of immigrants from Bolivia, Korea, Lithuania, Morocco, and elsewhere.

Ethnic historians, on the other hand, usually began with a focus on an ethnic group and then turned to oral histories as one kind of source among many. Local, family, and lay historians relied heavily on interviews to tell the stories of their and other communities, for example pioneer Sikhs in British Columbia, or Black working women in Ontario. Others, including academic historians and archivists, published extensive edited interviews in the form of recollections. Their objectives were usually those described by Joanna Matejko and Tova Yedlin in their 1977 collection of reminiscences of East European pioneers in Alberta: “to present a true picture of these immigrants’ pattern of settlement, their contribution to the life of the Province, and to explain the reasons for leaving their native land, and the choice of Canada as their new homeland.”

Academic historians of immigration and ethnicity were sometimes reluctant to use oral histories for several reasons. First, many archived oral histories were not transcribed, making them hard to access. Indeed, Harney had insisted that interviews not be transcribed, because researchers should listen to the original voices rather than a transcription that was seen as a poor representation of the

spoken word. Listening to endless hours on a medium – the cassette tape – that does not allow easy browsing and skipping back and forth, however, requires a major investment of time. At least in the analog age, the lack of transcripts constituted a major hurdle that few historians were willing to overcome in their search of evidence. Whether this will change in the digital age, when online media make browsing easier (albeit still not as easy as browsing through a transcript) and when an increasing number of archived interviews become available online, remains to be seen. Second, Canadian historians in general have been wary of oral history, perhaps best evident in the near complete absence of oral history based articles in the *Canadian Historical Review*. In part, this is rooted in a common prejudice against personal memory as inherently unreliable and subjective. Oral historians argued that many textual sources such as police and court records and even census data were based on oral interviews and individual memory. Rather than singling out oral history, they said, we need a more critical engagement with all of the sources we are using. Not everyone was convinced.

Ethnic historians' complicated relationship with oral history is perhaps best reflected in the way in which oral sources have often been used in the writing of immigration and ethnic history. Staying far away from Harney's bold claim that immigrants themselves could give us substantive evidence to our questions, oral testimony instead was commonly used in an ornamental or peripheral way, as a means to give a story that is based on written sources a more "human touch."

Oral sources were often used sporadically, with the objective of giving a "human face" to otherwise "dry" histories. Authors repeatedly argued that their narrators' vivid, rich, and at times contradictory stories provided details and more nuanced descriptions of social phenomena and historical events that were absent from quantitative data and institutional documents. Memories infused cold arguments with emotion and human drama and thus made complex experiences more accessible. Such arguments were not universally accepted. Scholars debated over the value of oral sources; while some argued that "one short quote can tell more than pages of unsubstantiated analysis," others dismissed them as "anecdotal." The difference was disciplinary: sociologists were adept at handling interview material, while historians, who until the 1990s were seldom trained in the use of oral sources, were at a loss at how to interpret them.

Some historians of ethnicity and immigration, however, have embraced Harney's claim and used oral sources, in dialogue with other sources, as substantive evidence for the histories they write. Several authors used both extant oral history collections and conducted their own interviews. Researchers working for the Multicultural History Society of Ontario were at the forefront of this movement, publishing their interview-based findings on topics such as sports, theatre, religion, education, labour, mutual aid societies, and the ethnic press in

the pages of *Polyphony*, published bi-annually between the winter of 1977/78 and 1994 (volumes 1-14). Through its *Ethnocultural Voices* series, the MHSO also published more extensive autobiographical accounts, including oral history based portraits of Japanese-Canadian picture brides and refugee families. Similarly, several volumes in the series *Generations: A History of Canada's Peoples*, published with support of the Secretary of State's Multiculturalism Program in the 1970s and 1980s, drew substantially on interviews. These included Grace M. Anderson and David Higgs's study of Portuguese immigrants in Canada and Harry Con et al.'s history of Chinese Canadian communities, for example.

Although initially unsure how to best work with oral sources, many ethnic historians, as Franca Iacovetta has written, "embraced [oral history] as a device that offered access to the stories of those traditionally silenced and provided a way of moving beyond the 'biased' accounts of 'outsiders.'" Following the British social and oral historian Paul Thompson, author of an early, influential guidebook called *The Voice of the Past*, some ethnic historians viewed oral history as a means to "empower" their subjects. "Giving people a voice" – or, rather, giving their voices a public forum – and letting people "tell their stories in their own words" became key motivations for oral historians – motivations that continue to drive their projects to the present day. Immigrants' stories, like those of women, workers, and other social groups historians had traditionally not studied, were counter-narratives to dominant national Anglo-Canadian myths. Those stories re-positioned immigrants as agents of their lives rather than the "uprooted" victims they had hitherto been described as. Whether writing from the "inside" or the "outside" of the communities they were studying, using oral history to include immigrant voices allowed researchers to write a different history, one that could effect social change, as anthropologist Parin Dossa argued in 2009 in her work on Muslim immigrant women: "Through storytelling we can claim some sense of agency and purpose."

The social purpose of democratizing history from below also encouraged ethnic historians from the 1970s on, to publish oral histories as primary sources. In the vein of Barry Broadfoot's collections, they edited transcripts and published their narrators' stories, usually accompanied by explanatory introductions. Such collections included the following: 45 interviews with Polish war veterans – the first immigrants to come to Canada after the Second World War – who rebuilt their lives on the prairies; Sheelagh Conway's oral histories of 22 female immigrants from Ireland, which are placed in a historical context and read through a feminist lens; Tomoko Makabe's portraits of five Japanese women who came to Canada during the 1920s as so-called picture brides; James Dickerson's interviews with eight Americans who came to Canada as draft resisters; and Xiaoping Li's interviews with 20 Japanese-Canadian and Chinese-Canadian artists and cultural activists. Other authors focused on one individual, basing their biographies on extensive interviewing. Rolf Knight's mother immigrated from

Germany to Vancouver during the 1920s. He tells her story, based on several interviews, in the form of her autobiography. Hugh Johnston tells the story of Tara Singh Bains, a Sikh immigrant to 1950s Vancouver, and provides more historical context, arguing that an individual's story allows him to tell a larger story of xenophobia and exclusion in a more immediate way.

Eventually, academic historians too became more interested in, enthusiastic about, and skilled at using oral history. Most commonly, they turned to oral sources as part of a larger archive of evidence that allowed them to investigate a topic in greater detail. Oral sources added additional facts. Arthur Grenke's 1975 dissertation of Germans in pre-World War One Winnipeg, based on a wealth of archival sources as well 65 interviews he conducted with community members, preceded similar studies by a decade. Few took oral history to the level of Stanley H. Scott's three-generational study of Italian, Russian, and English immigrant families in the West Kootenays in British Columbia in the mid-1970s. His team of six researchers conducted extensive studies of the area and spent countless hours in the communities before selecting and interviewing three members each of three families – nine individuals altogether – spanning three generations. Using semi-structured interviews and an extensive interview guide, interviews ranged from 16 to 30 hours per person, for a total of 3,000 pages of transcripts. As with so many oral history projects, however, it is unclear what became of the project.

Since the late 1980s, there have been a good number of monographic studies. An early study of South Asians in Canada by Norman Buchignani, Doreen Indra, and Ram Srivastava is a good example of the use of oral sources as complementary to other sources and without much or any complication of them as sources. Throughout the 1990s, most studies of immigrants or ethnic groups relied increasingly on oral sources, and most focused on the interwar and post-World War Two periods. Feminist historians were at the forefront of this new ethnic history. Varpu Lindström-Best talked with Finnish women about their work as domestic servants in the interwar period and gained a better understanding of how their work experiences shaped their world view. Joy Parr relied on oral interviews to weave a narrative of German furniture-makers in Hanover and English textile workers in Paris, Ontario that complicates the gendering of household economics. Ruth Frager conducted interviews and read other personal documents to understand how social class was refracted by gender and ethnicity in the making of the Jewish labour movement and working class in interwar Toronto. Although focusing on Hungarian-Canadian institutions in the interwar period, the oral history interviews Carmela Patrias conducted allowed her nevertheless to go beyond a study of immigrant and ethnic politics to a study of immigrants' politicization and the development of an ideologically divided group consciousness. Franca Iacovetta used stories from the Italian-Canadian community

of Toronto to write the history of Italians' work and family lives in postwar Toronto.

Research on postwar refugees, the so-called Displaced Persons, benefited significantly from oral history research. In the mid-1980s, Milda Danys used oral stories to go beyond the standard narratives of immigration policy and document how the application of this policy – in the form of rigorous and often humiliating medical examinations – was experienced by refugees from Lithuania. Lubomyr Luciuk explored how Ukrainian Displaced Persons and their children struggled with their memories to find their place in Canada. Hans Werner used interviews for a comparative study of Soviet German refugees in 1950s Winnipeg and 1970s Bielefeld (Germany). In my own work, I used oral history interviews to write about the experiences of postwar German immigrants and their descendants. Specifically, I investigated how single German women who immigrated as domestic servants to Vancouver in the 1950s negotiated their identities after immigration; how German women, men, and families made decisions about emigration to North America in the postwar period; how German-Canadian families negotiated memories of the Third Reich; and how German immigrants in Canada and the United States have made sense of the diverse ways in which they encountered and were confronted with the Nazi past in the second half of the twentieth century.

Others used oral sources to write larger, reconstructive narratives of “their” communities. Michiko Midge Ayukawa used oral histories as one of her major source corpuses to write the history of immigrants from Hiroshima during the difficult times of colonial racism and wartime exclusion. Isabel Kaprielian-Churchill used her extensive collection of interviews with Armenian-Canadians, conducted from the late 1970s to the early 2000s, to write the history of Armenians in Canada and to give them an opportunity, as she said, to tell their own story. As for many authors, oral sources allowed her to investigate the past and build an argument. “Oral sources,” she wrote, “enabled me to see patterns of mobility, or work, and of political and religious affiliation. Interviewees shed light on the frequency of sojourning, the places of sojourn, and the length of sojourning by men from the region Keghi.” Dirk Hoerder painted a coast-to-coast-to-coast landscape of national development with immigrants' stories, many of which he gathered from oral interviews.

From the late 1990s onward, authors increasingly drew on oral sources to build a substantial part of their argument. Next to complicating the concept of ethnicity, these authors also investigated how social class and gender shaped identities and social relations of power. Janis Thiessen interviewed Mennonite workers at factories in Southern Manitoba to better understand constructions of faith-based class identities and relations. Karen Flynn explored the complex subjectivities of

Black Canadian and Caribbean female nurses in her deeply oral history-based study of family, work, and migration.

Researchers also became interested in exploring how people remember what they experienced, complicating, in the process, the relationship between experience and storytelling. Pamela Sugiman conducted extensive oral history interviews to explore how the memories of wartime displacement and internment shaped the lives of Japanese-Canadian women. Marlene Epp relied substantially on life stories and memoirs, including a few dozen interviews, to explore the narratives of Mennonite women's experiences in the Soviet Union during the Second World War and their subsequent migrations to Canada and Paraguay. Other authors used studies of ethnic communities as a pathway to ask questions about the nation at large or the counter-narratives it generated. Patricia Wood used dozens of interviews with Italian immigrants in Alberta and British Columbia to parse the meanings of Canadian nationalism, arguing that "ethnics" defined themselves as Canadians without reference to Anglo- and Franco-Canadian narratives about the nation. Frank Kusch tackled another complicated relationship to the nation in his oral history-based investigation of American men and women who fled to Canada during the Vietnam War.

Folklorists, sociologists, psychologists, and other scholars also contributed to the writing of Canada's ethnic history. Among the first to use qualitative interviews were sociologists, studying, for example, the effects of the forced resettlement of the residents of Africville, Nova Scotia in the second half of the 1960s. They often used interviews as the major or even only corpus of evidence for their arguments. Exemplary among folklorist's use of oral narratives is Pauline Greenhill's use of diverse bodies of interviews to grapple with English ethnicity as it was manifested in Canadian society through various carnevalesque expressions such as theatre or dance. Psychologist Morton Beiser used survey data and 60 in-depth interviews with some of the 60,000 "boat people" – refugees from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam – who came to Canada between 1979 and 1981.

Sociologists have investigated groups that historians have often overlooked, including temporary workers and second and third-generation members of ethnic groups. Tanya Basok exposed the exploitative working conditions of temporary migrant labourers from Mexico working in Southern Ontario's agricultural industry. Paul Eid used semi-structured interviews to reveal processes of integration and identity formation among teenagers and young adolescents, all of whom were children of Arab immigrants. Gillian Creese quotes extensively from her interviews to document processes of community building within the African Diaspora in Vancouver. Edite Noivo interviewed three generations of a Portuguese-Canadian family to explore internal family dynamics while Kamal Elizabeth Nayar talked with three generations in the Sikh diaspora in British Columbia to understand cross-generational relations and changing

adaptations to modernity. Increasingly, literary scholars have constructed oral sources as texts that may be read like other texts. An excellent example is Julie Rak's reading of Doukhobor autobiographies as counter-narratives that resist identities prescribed by popular and official discourse.

While, as noted above, approaches to life history interviewing differ between oral history and other interviewing methods in the social sciences and humanities, in their analysis of interviews, there is much that historians can learn from social science and literary scholars' diverse approaches to oral sources. And indeed they have, if we go by the spate of recent history theses and dissertations completed since the turn of the millennium. These include, to name but a few of those published since 2000: Christian Lieb's interviews with postwar German immigrants in British Columbia; Nicole Bailey's story of women from Iran who immigrated to Vancouver after the Revolution of 1978-1979; Anastasia Kaketsis's exploration of Greek immigrant women's educational experiences in Calgary; Charlene Esteban Ronquillo's oral history of nine Filipino nurses who immigrated to western Canada between 1974 and 2005; Ruth Magaly San Martin's history of the Latin American Women's Collective in Toronto during the 1980s; Sonya White's analysis of storytelling and memory among Doukhobors; Magdalena Blackmore's oral history of second-generation Polish Canadians' identity formation in postwar Manitoba; and Stacey Zembrzycki's dissertation on Ukrainians in and around Sudbury in the first half of the twentieth century. All of these studies demonstrate the dramatic rise in the use of oral history interviews and in the critical reflection on them as sources and on the methods by which they are produced.

There are several reasons for this new approach that goes far beyond mining oral sources for facts, instead basing the historical argument in part on a discussion of the production of the sources. Oral history, although still somewhat marginalized, has gained a foothold in academia. An increasing number of professors who supervise graduate students have themselves used oral history. The social history revolution of the 1960s has turned into an expanding evolution, as more and more graduate students explore marginalized groups in society that often do not leave behind a paper trail except perhaps in state institutions such as hospitals, police, courts, and social welfare agencies. For writing the history of these groups, people's memories are often the only available evidence. Perhaps even more importantly, oral sources offer an exciting pathway into questions of evidence, subjectivity, memory, narrative identity construction, and social relations of power that many graduate students and their supervisors find intellectually stimulating.

Oral history was also seen as a major gateway to a better understanding of ethnic identity. Often, this included the author's own identity. For Myrna Kostash, interviewing second generation Ukrainian-Canadians was not so much a means

of finding her place in Ukrainian-Canadian communities, but in creating this place by “demystify[ing] the prevalent mythologies, indulged in by both Ukrainian-Canadians and non-Ukrainian-Canadians, about ethnic history in the prairies.” Oral history became a vehicle of recovery that allowed her to write against the “ethnic establishment.” Similarly, the members of the Women’s Issues Committee of the Chinese Canadian Council interviewed over 130 Chinese Canadian women of all ages and across Canada to write against the dominant narratives about male Chinese workers and “bachelors.” In the stories of the women they interviewed, the committee members wrote: “we see our mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers – ourselves. We see how far we have come and the hardships we have managed to overcome.” While such more empiricist studies have at times been waved off as “positivist,” Joan Sangster convincingly argues that such “recuperative” studies continue to make important contributions. In her historiography of working-class oral history, she has also found rich evidence that, despite claims by post-structuralist historians that suggest otherwise, questions about memory, subjectivity, narrative structure were on the minds of oral historians writing from a empiricist, revisionist, or recuperative perspective.

Taken together, these somewhat diverse literatures and forms of documentation – from archives and collections of interview excerpts to academic studies within varied disciplinary frameworks – achieved several objectives. Oral histories allowed researchers to demonstrate the great diversity within ethnic groups, who were not homogenous masses but rather differentiated and at times fragmented by gender, class, region, religion, dialect, place and other markers of identity that were equally important as ethnicity or race.

## **CAN IMMIGRANTS TELL THEIR STORIES? MEMORY, NARRATIVE, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF LIFE HISTORY**

Oral history holds the potential to illuminate people’s actions, decisions, motivations, and identities. Whether immigrants’ stories are indeed “the best source” (Harney) to study their motives and decisions, however, depends on how skillful the historian is at navigating the labyrinths of memory and narratives’ myriad layers of meaning. As Franca Iacovetta noted in 1995, ethnic historians’ “naïve assumption that oral testimonies are an unmediated text, an authentic voice,” had come under critique.

In 1979, Italian oral historian Luisa Passerini pointed to two problematic developments in Western European oral history that were true of developments in Canada as well. First, many historians used oral sources simply as containers of facts they could extract to reconstruct a past “as it actually was.” Second, other oral historians had begun to publish a “form of populism” that ran the risk of

“constructing oral history as merely an alternative ghetto, where at last the oppressed may be allowed to speak.” Neither would do. “We cannot afford to lose sight of the peculiar specificity of oral material,” Passerini argued. Instead, narratives needed to be read within more sophisticated conceptual frameworks that would enable historians to analyze “the dimensions of memory, ideology and subconscious desires.” Similarly, Alessandro Portelli argued in 1981 that historians needed to become attuned to the “peculiarities” of oral history. For both, oral sources’ subjectivity was not to be downplayed or celebrated, but to be critically analyzed. Oral history was a unique source to write a new history of subjectivity.

In this new critique of oral history that emerged in the late 1970s, several questions were raised: What did it mean if people “forgot” or “misremembered”? In path-breaking articles, Passerini and Portelli explored these questions. Passerini interviewed the Italian working class to understand their consensus to fascism. It was the silences and inconsistencies in their stories that were most revealing, contradicting historiography, and forcing her to take seriously the reality of women’s and men’s attitudes to work and politics. Portelli wondered how it was that so many people of Terni, Italy confounded two distinct events in the postwar period, often misplacing the death of Luigi Trastulli, a young steel worker killed during an anti-NATO rally in 1949, to violent labour strikes in 1953. This was not the result of faulty individual memory – too many remembered it that way – but rather because in the *longue durée* of memory, Trastulli’s death “became the ground upon which collective memory and imagination built a cluster of talks, symbols, legends, and imaginary reconstructions.” Other scholars, like Ronald J. Grele in the United States, added similarly sophisticated analyses of “inaccurate” or “subjective” memory. This new approach made it impossible to return to an interpretation of oral narratives as transparent windows onto a lived (“authentic”) experience or to dismiss them as inconsequential gossip, anecdotes, or tangents.

Several ethnic historians took up the challenge of memory. Marlene Epp argued that while oral sources were subjective, they nevertheless contained “substantial objective information.” Interviews allowed historians to reconstruct a past. As important, however, was their value for understanding how people made sense of their experiences. Memory allowed researchers to “explore the creation of patterns and myths in the process of remembering” (Epp). Mennonite refugee women’s stories about rape in the wake of the Second World War led Epp to ask difficult questions about the relationship between experience and memory. Women pursued various narrative strategies to avoid talking about rape and to make their stories conform to Mennonite master narratives. Their “rape stories” told of their experiences through silences rather than words while the words of church elders’ silenced their experiences. There was no linear progression from

experience to memory to story. More often than not, it was unclear whose story they told.

Whose stories then were ethnic historians hearing as they listened to the immigrant narrators? If these were not stories of unique, authentic experiences, were they simply utterances of “false consciousness,” reproductions of culturally available plots, effects of hegemonic discourses, or pastiches of narrative and mnemonic fragments culled from one’s own life as much as from novels and films? And what, in the construction of these stories, was the role of the interviewer?

This question about the role of the interviewer was of particular importance to ethnic historians. The idea that interviewers could be detached observers simply tapping into people’s memories was a myth of postwar social science that attempted to standardize survey methods. That interviewers shaped responses, however, became obvious when people were interviewed by researchers of different sexes, races, or ethnicities. The life stories told in oral history interviews were not monologues, but rather “dialogic narratives” (Grele). Oral history was not simply storytelling but a form of “history telling” because an interviewer’s probing questions allowed the informant to go beyond the telling of socially acceptable stories he or she would tell in other private or public venues. Oral history therefore needed to be understood as a “genre” (Portelli), an interactive situation that generated stories in a particular form.

This research on the interactive relationship between interviewers and interviewees was of urgent matter for ethnic historians, because they often defined themselves (or were defined by their interviewees) as “insiders” or “outsiders” to the communities they worked with. Indeed, in that respect there is little balance in the historiography of Canada’s ethnic groups. “Rare are the works on immigrant communities written by an ‘outsider,’” Patricia Wood noted in 2002. This is not surprising. After decades of social scientist “outsiders” writing about immigrants as social problems and deviants, and after suffering historians’ long-standing disinterest in ethnic groups, many wrongs needed to be corrected and many gaps needed to be filled. As members of groups whose history had not been written, researchers were often motivated by the goal of letting their communities finally tell their own stories. Insiders were fundamental to democratizing Canadian history. Without them and their informants, our history would be much paler.

Yet, Wood’s assessment brings to the fore fundamental questions about the use of oral history in the study of Canada’s ethnic groups. Few writers reflected on their status as insiders, and if they did, they hardly ventured beyond generic statements about the advantages (and, less often admitted, disadvantages) of the insider status. Important questions went unanswered: What constituted an

“insider” or an “outsider”? Was this a useful dichotomy? What happened if researchers and “their” communities disagreed on the researcher’s status? Why should a shared language or culture easily bridge ideological, political, religious, class, gender and other differences? Many authors who considered themselves insiders argued that sharing the culture of their interviewees helped them better understand the stories they heard. Fewer acknowledged that assumptions about “shared” knowledge may also act as blinders, especially if such assumptions are not critically reflected. In interviews, this may result in questions not asked, because an interviewer may assume she knows what her informant is saying – she may, but she may not. In the presentation of research results, it may lead to writing for an insider audience, thus making all research into an internal discourse.

Many authors also point out that their insider status gave them access to “the” community. Initially, this is certainly true, but in the use of relatives and friends as informants, there is often little acknowledgement that they may also act as gatekeepers, presenting to the researcher only those people they deem to be members of “the” – their – community. As Janis Thiessen’s research on Mennonite employers in Southern Manitoba demonstrates, being a member of the same ethno-religious group did not build an easy bridge across lines of social class and ideology. The workers and bosses had to negotiate these boundaries as much as she did in her relations with both employers and employees. Finally, few authors ventured to address the bonds of loyalty and trust that may have prevented them from asking difficult questions or writing about troubling experiences. Michiko Midge Ayukawa acknowledged that bonds of loyalty made her exclude stories and information that she considered harmful to her respondents. While she considered this the ethically correct response, she did not question the methodological implications for her research results.

Patricia Wood, a writer with American and Canadian citizenship and no Italian roots, wrote that “[I]acking intimate, personal knowledge of an Italian family is an initial disadvantage [...] but my ability in the language and my comfort with the culture provides access while maintaining what is sometimes a valuable distance.” What is this distance? Outsiders study the unfamiliar in order to make it familiar, that is, to understand it and to make it understandable to their audience. Wood’s work is insightful in large part because she succeeded in this anthropological approach. Such insights are often more difficult for insiders, because they study the familiar and often fail to make it unfamiliar first, before making it once again familiar. As a result, and as Wood has also noted, their books are often read only by other insiders.

The insider-outsider dilemma illuminates the problems associated with claims that oral history allows immigrants to tell “their” stories as much as with claims that insiders can tell “their” community’s story. The insider-outsider dilemma

also threw into relief the more general question about researchers' ethical responsibilities vis-à-vis their informants. Such concerns were seriously raised only in the 1990s. Indeed, national guidelines governing ethical conduct in all research on human beings were published only in the 1990s and first brought together in the 1998 "Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans" (TCPS). While such policies acted as useful guidelines, they were borne out of concerns with grave abuses of basic human rights in medical research. Increasingly, ethical review boards at universities became roadblocks to historical research, demanding, in some cases, that oral historians breach basic principles of best practice. They asked that historians anonymize all interviews and even destroy them after publishing their findings. Vigorous education by oral historians led to improvements in the second version of the TCPS.

Two recent developments in studies on refugees and immigrants who have survived human rights violations explore diverse approaches to the methodological and ethical challenges posed by research on and within ethnic communities. At Concordia University, researchers at the "Montreal Life Stories" project recorded 500 "life stories of Montrealers displaced by war, genocide and other human rights violations" between 2007 and 2012. Guided by the principle of "sharing authority" (Frisch) between interviewers and interviewees, they partnered with colleagues in the digital humanities who helped them use digital technologies to create interviews, collaborate on research, analyze and archive video and audio, and disseminate stories through academic media and popular technologies. They worked closely with a wide range of community groups, artists, activists, and educators, and with scholars from diverse disciplines to ensure broad cooperation and the widespread use and dissemination of research results. From the beginning, for example, the Montreal researchers emphasized the use of video and explored the development of digital storytelling – a method that allows participants to edit short videos about their experiences and that can be easily disseminated online.

At the University of Winnipeg, researchers are exploring diverse approaches to collaborative work with refugee communities, including post-Second World War displaced persons, Salvadoran and other Latin American refugees who came in the wake of civil wars, and recent refugees from Sierra Leone, Burma, Afghanistan and other countries that became destabilized after the Cold War. In the project titled "Stories of Homeland, Violence, and Migration: Memories and Histories of Refugees in Manitoba, 1945-2010," oral history is re-configured as participatory action research that emphasizes the involvement and training of community members in oral history research. The Winnipeg researchers emphasized the use of high quality audio and the selective use of documentary quality video shot in the field and in the studio of the University of Winnipeg's Oral History Centre. As in Montreal, researchers in Winnipeg looked to digital storytelling and other online forms of online storytelling.

The projects in Montreal and Winnipeg are driven by ethical and political concerns about the divide between researchers and “researched.” The projects strove to train community members in the practice of oral history so that they could fully engage in the research process. Thus, rather than construing their experiences as objects of research in need of interpretation by professional historians, they were viewed and trained as historians of their lives and the worlds in which they lived. This had wide-ranging implications for the whole research process. From the beginning, university researchers and community partners sat at the table to discuss and negotiate project design, methods, outcomes, and ownership of the research.

## CONCLUSION

Much effort has been expended in the past on creating archives of oral histories of immigrants and their descendants, and individual researchers have increasingly turned to these archives as well as to conducting their own interviews when they wished to write about Canada’s ethnic groups. Hence, much of Canadian ethnic history has come to rely, to a greater or lesser degree, on oral sources. This makes sense. Why not ask immigrants and their descendants themselves if we want to find out about their experiences of migration, settlement, and integration?

The results, however, have been uneven. Most oral histories with immigrants have been conducted by insiders, and often with little reflection on the implications of their “insider” status in the construction of their interviewees’ stories and the histories they themselves wrote. Much of the ethnic historiography that is based on oral history takes immigrant narratives at face value, in part because an insider status may prevent researchers from posing fundamental critiques of experiences and memories as narrative constructions, in part because empathy may at times be confused with sympathy for one’s own group, and in part because telling a story about the past is difficult if not impossible if one continually needs to refract it through its multiple narrative or discursive constructions. The results vary between flat images that diminish migrating people’s complex lives and personalities and moving portraits of people’s survival and endurance.

At the same time, there have been many excellent examples of historians working with ethnic groups’ oral histories that have made use of the international literature on subjectivity, memory, and narrative to explore the complicated constructions of identities and social relations of power in immigrant communities. While we need to write both, the history of the familiar and the history of the unfamiliar, it may be time for ethnic historians to use oral histories as a means to write more often the history of the unfamiliar. While language is

often claimed to be a major hurdle for outsiders, the vast majority of extant oral histories with immigrants and their descendants is in English or French and thus accessible to all researchers. Furthermore, there is great value in conducting cross-generational interviews, comparing old and new interviews and re-interviewing people decades after their first testimony. Just as oral history has called into question many of the basic assumptions about history, it may also help to further push the boundaries of research on Canada's ethnic groups.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Oral history is published in a variety of formats. A great number of oral history interviews with immigrants are inaccessible, because interviewers never deposited them in public or private repositories. Countless reel-to-reel and cassette tapes are slowly disintegrating in people's basements and attics. Of those interviews that are accessible, many times researchers will find only audio recordings; sometimes, these are supplemented by summaries or full transcripts. The audio and content quality of these interviews varies considerably. The Canadian Oral History Association's *Guide to Oral History Collections* (1993) is a keyword-searchable online database that provides free access to information about many of the collections created up to the early 1990s (<http://www.oralhistorycentre.ca/archival-records>). The largest archival collection is that of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario.

Published oral histories come in different forms or genres. Following US oral historian Linda Shopes, we can distinguish them as follows: oral biographies of one individual; group narratives, that is, interviews with several informants about a specific topic; and finally interpretive studies in which authors use oral histories as evidence for their argument. Oral histories have become ubiquitous sources, particularly for twentieth and twenty-first century history. Many books draw on oral histories among other sources, sometimes in order to build an argument, at other times, and more often, to simply inject a narrative with "life." Oral history, be it in the form of evidence or as a methodological or theoretical framework, does not inform such studies in any significant way and therefore, studies that draw on oral history without engaging with it as a form of evidence or method are left out of this bibliography.

## WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

Robert F. Harney's *Oral Testimony and Ethnic Studies* ([Toronto]: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, [1978?], available online at <http://www.ourroots.ca/e/toc.aspx?id=9214>) provides a brief introduction to

the use of oral history in immigration history and a useful and extensive list of questions to ask in an oral history interview. Robert Redfield, Ralph Linton, and Melville J. Herskovits, "Memorandum for the Study of Acculturation," *American Anthropologist* 38, no. 1 (Jan.-Mar. 1936): 149-152; Heinz Lehmann, *The German Canadians, 1750-1937: Immigration, Settlement, and Culture* (St. John's, Nfld: Jespersen Press, 1986). Alexander Freund, "Oral History in Canada: A Paradox," in Klaus-Dieter Ertler and Hartmut Lutz, eds., *Canada in Grainau: A Multidisciplinary Survey after 30 Years / Le Canada à Grainau: un survol multidisciplinaire 30 ans après* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), 305-335 surveys the development of oral history in Canada. Robert Sellar, *The History of the County of Huntington and of the Seigniories of Chateaugay and Beauharnois From Their First Settlement to the Year 1838* (Huntingdon [Quebec]: Canadian Gleaner, 1888).

Useful guides for developing oral history projects include Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000); Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003); Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2005). More accessible guides for community and school projects include Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan, *The Oral History Manual* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2002) and Angela Zusman, *Story Bridges: A Guide to Conducting Intergenerational Oral History Projects* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2010). Online guides include *The Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide*, at <http://www.folklife.si.edu/resources/pdf/interviewingguide.pdf>; Nebraska State Historical Society, "Capturing the Living Past: An Oral History Primer," at [http://www.nebraskahistory.org/lib-arch/research/audiovis/oral\\_history](http://www.nebraskahistory.org/lib-arch/research/audiovis/oral_history). See also the small handbook by Lillian Petroff, *Oral Testimony and Community History: A Guide* (Toronto: MHSO, 2002).

Additional online resources can be found on the websites of the Canadian Oral History Association, <http://www.canoha.ca>; of the International Oral History Association, <http://iohanet.org>; and of the American Oral History Association, [www.oralhistory.org](http://www.oralhistory.org).

## LETTING IMMIGRANTS TELL THEIR STORIES

Journalists were among the first to conduct and publish interviews with immigrants. Two publications include Barry Broadfoot, *The Immigrant Years: From Europe to Canada, 1945 to 1967* (Toronto: Douglas and McIntyre 1986); Myrna Kostash, *All of Baba's Children* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1977); Ivaylo Grouev, *Bullets on the Water: Refugee Stories* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); Kenneth Bagnell, *The Little Immigrants: The Orphans Who Came to Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1980) and *Canadese: A Portrait of the Italian*

*Canadians* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1989); Susan Gabori, *In Search of Paradise: The Odyssey of an Italian Family* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993). Group histories written for a non-academic audience include Serjeet Singh Jagpal, *Becoming Canadian: Pioneer Sikhs in Their Own Words* (Vancouver: Harbour Publishing, 1994); Joanna Matejko and Tova Yedlin, eds., *Alberta's Pioneers from Eastern Europe: Reminiscences* (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1977).

*Polyphony: Bulletin of the Multicultural Society of Ontario*, v.1 (1977/78)-14(1994), partially available online; Hilary Chance and Lillian Petroff, "The Future of Our Past: The Changing Face of Oral Testimony at the Multicultural History Society of Ontario," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 23 (2003): 29-39. In the MHSO's Ethnocultural Voices Series, oral history-based publications include Tomako Makabe, *Picture Brides: Japanese Women in Canada*, transl. Kathleen Chisato Merken. Multicultural History Society of Ontario (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Elizabeth McLuhan, ed., *Safe Haven: The Refugee Experience of Five Families*. Multicultural History Society of Ontario (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995); Grace M. Anderson and David Higgs, *A Future to Inherit: Portuguese Communities in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976).

Collections of edited oral histories include Kazimierz Patalas, ed., *Providence Watching: Journeys from Wartorn Poland to the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2003); Sheelagh Conway, *The Faraway Hills Are Green: Voices of Irish Women in Canada* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1992); Women's Book Committee, Chinese Canadian National Council, *Jin Guo: Voice of Chinese Canadian Women* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1992); James Dickerson, *North to Canada. Men and Women Against the Vietnam War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999); Xiaoping Li, *Voices Rising: Asian Canadian Cultural Activism* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007); Rolf Knight with Phyllis Knight, *A Very Ordinary Life* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1974; available online: [http://www.rolfknight.ca/A\\_Very\\_Ordinary\\_Life.pdf](http://www.rolfknight.ca/A_Very_Ordinary_Life.pdf)); Hugh Johnston and Tara Singh Bains, *The Four Quarters of the Night and the Life-Journey of an Emigrant Sikh* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995).

Studies based on oral histories include Art Grenke, *The German Community in Winnipeg, 1872 to 1919* (New York: AMS Press, 1991); Stanley H. Scott, "An Oral Methodology For Ethnic Studies From the Junior Secondary to the Graduate School," in: *Ethnic Canadians: Culture and Education*, ed. Martin L. Kovacs (Saskatoon: Modern Press, 1978), 427-444; Milda Danys, *DP: Lithuanian Immigration to Canada After the Second World War* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1986); Varpu Lindström-Best, *Defiant Sisters: A Social History of Finnish Immigrant Women in Canada* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1988); Joy Parr, *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men,*

and Change in Two Industrial Towns, 1880-1950 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Ruth A. Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto 1900-1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Franca Iacovetta, *Such Hardworking People: Italian Immigrants in Postwar Toronto* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992); Pauline Greenhill, *Ethnicity in the Mainstream: Three Studies of English Canadian Culture in Ontario* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994); Carmela Patrias, *Patriots and Proletarians: Politicizing Hungarian Immigrants in Interwar Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994); Dirk Hoerder, *Creating Societies: Immigrant Lives in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999) is a narrative of Canadian immigration history that draws heavily on oral histories and other ego-documents (letters, diaries, etc.); Lubomyr Luciuk, *Searching For Place: Ukrainian Displaced Persons, Canada, and the Migration of Memory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Marlene Epp, *Women Without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Frank Kusch, *All American Boys: Draft Dodgers in Canada from the Vietnam War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001); Hans Werner, *Imagined Homes: Soviet German Immigrants in Two Cities* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2007); Janis Thiessen, *Manufacturing Mennonites: Work and Religion in Post-War Manitoba* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Karen Flynn, *Moving Beyond Borders: A History of Black Canadian and Caribbean Women in the Diaspora* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); Pamela Sugiman, "'Life is Sweet': Vulnerability and Composure in the Wartime Narratives of Japanese Canadians," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43(1): 186-218; Franca Iacovetta, "Manly Militants, Cohesive Communities, and Defiant Domestic: Writing about Immigrants in Canadian Historical Scholarship," *Labour/Le Travail* 36 (Fall 1995): 217-252; Alexander Freund, "A Canadian Family Talks About Oma's Life in Nazi Germany: Three-Generational Interviews and Communicative Memory," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 29 (2009), Special Issue "Remembering Family, Analyzing Home: Oral History and the Family," 1-26.

Studies based on social science interviews include Donald H. Clairmont and Dennis W. Magill, *Africville Relocation Report* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Institute of Public Affairs, 1971; available online at <http://www.library.dal.ca/ebooks/africville>); James L. Di Giacomo, *They Live in the Moneta: An Overview of the History and Changes in Social Organization of Italians in Timmons, Ontario* (Toronto: Institute for Behavioural Research, York University, 1982); Morton Beiser, *Strangers at the Gate: The "Boat Peoples" First Ten Years in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Tanya Basok, *Tortillas and Tomatoes: Transmigrant Mexican Workers in Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002); Gillian Creese, *The New African Diaspora in Vancouver: Migration, Exclusion, and Belonging* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); Paul Eid, *Being Arab: Ethnic and*

*Religious Identity Building among Second Generation Youth in Montreal* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007); Edite Noivo, *Inside Ethnic Families: Three Generations of Portuguese Canadians* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1997); Kamal Elizabeth Nayar, *The Sikh Diaspora in Vancouver: Three Generations amid Tradition, Modernity, and Multiculturalism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Parin Dossa, *Racialized Bodies, Disabling Worlds: Storied Lives of Immigrant Muslim Women* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

Recent theses and dissertations extensively based on oral history interviews include Nicole Bailey, "Zancouver: The History of Iranian Women Migrants in Vancouver 1978-2007," M.A. thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2008; Magdalena Blackmore, "Creating Identities: A Case Study of Second Generation Polish Immigrants in Manitoba after World War II," M.A. thesis, University of Manitoba/University of Winnipeg, 2009; Barbara-Ann G. Hamilton, "What is the Leisure Experience of Older African Nova Scotian Women?" M.A. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1998; Anastasia Kaketsis, "Perspectives of Greek Immigrant Women and the Education of their Children in Canada," M.A. thesis, University of Calgary, 2000; Christian Lieb, "Moving West: German-Speaking Immigration to British Columbia, 1945-1961," Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Victoria, 2008; Charlene Esteban Ronquillo, "Immigrant Filipino Nurses in Western Canada: An Exploration of Motivations and Migration Experiences through Oral History," M.N. thesis, Vancouver: University of British Columbia 2010; Ruth Magaly San Martin, "Picking Up the Thread: An Oral History of the Latin American Women's Collective in Toronto, 1983-1990," M.A. thesis, University of Toronto 1998; Sonya White, "History from the Heart: Difficult Pasts and Possible Futures in the Heterogeneous Doukhobor Community in Canada," M.A. thesis, University of Toronto, 2011; Stacey Raeanna Zembrzycki, "Memory, Identity, and the Challenge of Community Among Ukrainians in the Sudbury Region, 1901-1939," Ph.D. dissertation, Carleton University 2007; Nadia Jones-Gailani, "Iraqi Women in Diaspora: Resettlement, Religion and Remembrance in the Iraqi Diaspora in Toronto and Detroit, 1980 to present," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Toronto 2013. For Joan Sangster's historiographical essay on recuperative oral history, see her article "Oral History and Working Class History: A Rewarding Alliance," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 33 (2013) "Working Lives: Special Issue on Oral History and Working-Class History."

## **CAN IMMIGRANTS TELL THEIR STORIES? MEMORY, NARRATIVE, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF LIFE HISTORY**

Excellent reference works include Alistair Thomson and Robert Perks, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2006); Donald A. Ritchie, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011); Thomas L.

Charlton et al., *Handbook of Oral History* (Lanham, MD: Altamira Press, 2006). Several essay collections that offer theoretically sophisticated and influential work include Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (New York: SUNY Press, 1991); Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); Ronald J. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, 2nd ed. rev. and enlarged (New York: Greenwood, 1991); Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson, *Oral History and Photography* (New York: Palgrave, 2011); Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010); Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007). See also Luisa Passerini, "Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism," *History Workshop* (1979): 82-108.

Useful introductions to the life story interview are: Almut Leh, "Ethical Problems in Research Involving Contemporary Witnesses," transl. Edith Burley, *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 29 (2009): 1-14; Alexander von Plato, "Contemporary Witnesses and the Historical Profession: Remembrance, Communicative Transmission, and Collective Memory in Qualitative History," transl. Edith Burley, *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 29 (2009): 1-27 (available online at [www.oralhistoryforum.ca](http://www.oralhistoryforum.ca)). An excellent guide to publishing oral histories is Linda Shopes, "Editing Oral History For Publication," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 31 (2011): 1-24.

Alexander Freund and Laura Quilici, "Exploring Myths in Women's Narratives: Italian and German Immigrant Women in Vancouver, 1947-1961," *BC Studies* nos. 105-106 (Spring/Summer 1995): 159-182; Marlene Epp, "The Memory of Violence: Soviet and East European Mennonite Refugees and Rape in the Second World War," *Journal of Women's History* 9, no. 1 (1997): 58-87; on the complicated relationships between researchers and informants, see Nancy Cook, "The Thin Within the Thick: Social History, Postmodern Ethnography and Textual Practice," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 32(63) (1999): 85-101; Franca Iacovetta, "Post Modern Ethnography, Historical Materialism and Decentering the (Male) Authorial Voice: A Feminist Conversation," *Histoire sociale/Social History*, 32 (64) (1999), 275-293; Stacey Zembrzycki, "Sharing Authority with Baba," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 43/1 (Winter 2009): 219-238; on the use of archived oral history collections, see Alexander Freund, "Oral History As Process-Generated Data," *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 34/1 special issue "Theory and Data" (2009): 22-48 (available online at [http://hsr-trans.zhsf.uni-koeln.de/hsrretro/docs/artikel/hsr/hsr2009\\_1126.pdf](http://hsr-trans.zhsf.uni-koeln.de/hsrretro/docs/artikel/hsr/hsr2009_1126.pdf)).

## IMMIGRATION AND ETHNICITY IN CANADA

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