

## Chapter 21

# Archiving Audio and Video Interviews

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores developments in and prospects for the online archival storage and retrieval of oral history interviews—with a focus on experiences and projects in Germany. The introductory section examines the contemporary history research method, oral history, which has led to extensive collections of interviews with witnesses of different historical periods, including survivors of Nazi persecution. To characterize the nature of oral history interviews, attention is given to their narrative form and the biographical dimension. Emphasizing the specific value of this material, the authors discuss the demands involved in archiving such material framed by the expectations on both sides, witnesses as interview partners and researchers and other interested persons as archive users. A German example for state-of-the-art online archiving strategies called the “Forced Labor 1939-1945. Memory and History” archive, is presented, outlining the technical challenges and research features as well as research functionality and further enhancements. Possible avenues for further development within the field are outlined: a meta-search engine covering multiple databases and an open online archive. A crucial ethical question is also presented in this chapter: How can a responsible online access policy ensure the protection of the contemporary witnesses’ personal rights?*

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## A BRIEF INTRODUCTION INTO THE HISTORY OF ORAL HISTORY IN GERMANY

Research based on interviews with witnesses to historical events and the interest in biographical processes and subjective personal information have a long tradition in the social sciences and humanities. In the field of sociology, the study “The Polish Peasant in Europe and America” by the Chicago sociologist Isaac Thomas and his Polish colleague Florian Znaniecki, published in 1918-1920, is regarded as the starting point of biographical methods. In historiography oral testimonies based on the subjective memory of events have been used as a source since antiquity.

However, in Germany, as in various other Western European countries, it was in the 1970s and 1980s that research based on interviews with contemporary witnesses, or life-story interviews with people who lived through a certain period or event, really boomed in almost all areas of the humanities: biographical research emerged in sociology and pedagogy, ethnography and ethnology, historical and literary studies, as well as in psychoanalysis and psychology.

For all the differences among the various academic disciplines, in terms of their research questions, terminology, methods, and research strategies, all these fields emphasize the subjectivity or/and the relationship of the individual to society. This attitude has developed against a background of increasing doubt about the explanatory claims of grand historical narratives or large-scale theoretical frameworks. As a result, biographical research has increasingly claimed its own independent research approach and has asserted the efficacy of individual action in relation to the determinative power of structural conditions.

In German historiography, research based on interviews with contemporary witnesses has become known as oral history. The USA and Great Britain had a pioneering role in this field, and it was some time before other countries followed suit.

As it was adapted and developed further, the oral history method was enhanced by different national scientific and political traditions.<sup>1</sup> In Germany this branch of research initially encountered a great deal of resistance from established historians, while from the outset oral history enjoyed great popularity in the non-academic context, in local historical associations (*Geschichtswerkstätten*) as well as school and non-school based educational programs. Indeed, in the 1980s a virtual movement emerged dedicated to researching “history from below” and the history of the “little people.” This was reinforced by a democratic impulse to include the people such as women or laborers who had been notoriously ignored by historiography up until this point.

In Germany this research was focused above all on the period of National Socialism and the Second World War. However, interview-based research has also come to include many other topics and historical periods, and as a result the past thirty years have seen a multitude of witnesses to a wide range of historical events interviewed by researchers.

As this practice has developed over the years a process of normalization and professionalization can be discerned in the attitude toward oral history interviews. We can speak of normalization in the sense that, where it is appropriate, the use of interviews as a historical source in scholarly research has now become largely uncontroversial. The historical profession has largely abandoned its initial reservations, and today it is hard to imagine the presentation of historical information in exhibitions, documentations and films without the use witness accounts of the relevant events.

The process of professionalization relates to the development of a specific methodological approach. Whereas in the early years of oral history, it seemed that anyone capable of operating a tape recorder considered themselves qualified to conduct an interview, subsequent years have seen the development and establishment of the narrative interview method developed by the

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