



WORKSHOP

STORIES OF LIVES, LIVES OF STORIES

21-22 February 2019, European University Institute

Sala del Consiglio – Villa Salviati, Via Bolognese 156, Firenze

ABSTRACT

Walter Benjamin reminds us that “History is made up of fragments and absences. What is left out is as significant as what is included”. According to Grant McCracken, life stories are accounts given by an individual about his/her life; they become life stories when they are validated by other sources. (1988: 19). Hence, differently than in personal documents, the object is the individual whose history we reconstruct. (Angell 1945). While autobiographies, memoirs, or diaries are written for various purposes, life histories are collected for the specific purpose of qualitative research. (Della Porta 2014: 262). In tune with this approach, this workshop problematizes the visibility of different actors in history and suggests alternative ways of history writing by advocating a more inclusive historiography that gives “voice to the voiceless”.

From famous figures’ obscured global moments to common people’s memory, the workshop focuses on the hidden, the untold, the forgotten. The question of agency, subjectivity, and the historian’s authority over it becomes entangled with methodological and ethical challenges. This ultimately results in a multi-layered interaction of the researcher and its subject(s) in an effort to co-construct the narrative. As the title of this workshop suggests, on the one hand, there are different individual and collective life-stories; on the other hand, there are the multiple lives and afterlives of these stories. They are born and reproduced through mediation, repetition, censorship, and selection; at the same

time, they are shared through networks and shaped through intersubjectivity. They can survive in form of letters, memoirs, biographies, in the oral tradition and the individual and collective memory. In other words, the historian is as much part of the life story as the narrator whose life is told. On this note, the workshop will discuss how and why do historians construct and de-construct life-stories. What is the contribution of ego-documents to historiography and what makes them special? Is this kind of history more empowering and socially engaged and why?

Barbara Myerhoff wrote that “one of the most persistent but elusive ways that people make sense of themselves is to show themselves to themselves, through multiple forms.” (1992: 257). This workshop will introduce a variety of life stories research approaches by focusing on the sources for writing life stories, such as archival sources, memoirs, letters, but also life story interviews. Particular focus will be given to the kind of sources available to historians and the methodological and theoretical approaches for its interpretation. The active participation of EUI researchers by presenting their own ongoing research and by joining the discussion is strongly encouraged. We warmly invite students and scholars from other EUI Departments and other universities in Florence to attend our workshop and join the debate.





PROGRAMME

Thursday, 21 February

10:45 Introduction and Welcome

Morning Session

11:00 Maria Adamopoulou, (EUI): *Migrants' eternal returns: return visits from West Germany to Greece and family strategies*

11:20 Adrian-George Matus (EUI): *"A fatherless generation"? Roots of 1968ers*

11:40 Uladzimir Valodzin (EUI) *A well-forgotten story: Aleksandr Udodov and his unusable past*

12:00 Q&A

12:30 Lunch Break

Afternoon Session

14:00 Dieter Reinisch (Webster University/University of Vienna) *Life stories and oral history in post-conflict societies: On trust and the role of the interviewer*

14:40 Catalina Andricioaei (EUI) *Parallel interviews: the spoken and the gestured*

15:00 Q&A

15.30 Coffee Break (Sala della Conchiglia)

16.00 **Keynote lecture by Luisa Passerini (Emerita Professor, EUI), *"Dialogues and Silences in Oral and Visual Stories"***

17.30 Wine Reception

Friday, 22 February

Morning Session

Chair: Lucy Riall (EUI)

- 11:00** Turkey Gasimova (EUI) *De-constructing the life a young Muslim Russian subject in Europe through personal letters*
- 11:20** Aleksandra Tobiasz (EUI) *Gombrowicz's Diary - between the literary and ego-documental perspective*
- 11:40** Victoria Witkowski (EUI) *Between Myth & Reality: Tracing the Cultural Representation of the Fascist Empire through the Life and After-life of Rodolfo Graziani*
- 12:00** Q&A
- 12:30** **Lunch Break**

Afternoon Session

Chair: Laura Downs (EUI)

- 14:00** Matteo Capasso (EUI) *In-Between Taḥālib (algae) and Jurdhān (rats): Oral Histories in Turbulent Times*
- 14:20** Svetlana Poleschuk (EUI) *Academic Careers in a Rapidly Changing World: Biographies of Academics Who Stayed or Left Belarus After the Year 1991*
- 14:40** Gabriella Romano (Birkbeck College, University of London) *Dealing with silence/s*
- 15:00** Q&A
- 15.30** **Coffee Break (Sala della Conchiglia)**
- 16:00** **Keynote lecture by Alison Light 'Writing the Lives of "Common People": Reflections on the Idea of Obscurity'**

Dinner – Invitation Only



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

ALISON LIGHT

Professor Alison Light is a fulltime writer. She is also an Honorary Professor in the Department of English at University College, London, an Honorary Professorial Fellow in the Department of English at Edinburgh University, and a Senior Research Fellow at Pembroke College, Oxford. She has taught at a number of institutions including, most recently at Newcastle University and University College, London. She has also worked for the BBC, taught in adult education and as a schoolteacher. Her reviews and essays have appeared in the national press and she is a contributor to the London Review of Books.

Her most recent book, *Common People: the History of an English Family* (Penguin 2014; Chicago University Press 2015) was shortlisted for the 2014 Samuel Johnson Prize in Nonfiction. A mix of social history, memoir and reflection, it used her own family history to explore the story of the itinerant working poor. Professor Light writes chiefly on issues to do with British cultural life and history, the subject of both *Forever England: Literature, Femininity and Conservatism between the Wars* (Routledge 1991) and *Mrs Woolf and the Servants* (Penguin 2007 and Bloomsbury USA 2009), which was runner-up for the Longman History Prize. As the widow of the historian, Raphael Samuel, who died in 1996, she spent several years helping to establish a History Centre and Archive in his name in London and edited two volumes of Samuel's essays: *Island Stories: Unravelling Britain* (Verso 1997) and *The Lost World of British Communism* (Verso 2006).

Her current project as a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Edinburgh is 'A Critical Memoir: From Memory to Archive', an account of her marriage to Samuel, who was twenty years her senior. It reflects on politics (Samuel was 'brought up' in the British Communist Party), on the nature of memory and mourning, and on the sources from which we, as writers, biographers and historians, generate a life. *A Radical Romance: A Memoir of Love, Grief and Consolation* will be published by Fig Tree/Penguin Press, hopefully at the end of 2019.

Keynote lecture's title and abstract

Writing the Lives of "Common People": Reflections on the Idea of Obscurity

"Once a life has been turned into stories, it becomes those stories" (Jeremy Gavron, *A Woman on the Edge of Time* (2016)). What makes an ordinary or an 'extraordinary life'? Is it a matter of event or of achievement, of being at the heart of what we call 'History'? Or simply one of writing? How do historians, biographers, and others shape the lives that they write and what ideas of self and the individual, as opposed to the collective or representative, underpin the writing? I shall discuss these questions by looking at the life of one woman, who lived to the age of 90, and who features in the memoir I have written.

LUISA PASSERINI

Luisa Passerini is Professor Emerita of History at the European University Institute, Florence, and has been Principal Investigator of the European Research Council Project “Bodies Across Borders: Oral and Visual Memory in Europe and Beyond”, 2013-2018. She is also former Professor of Cultural History at the University of Turin, recipient of the All European Academies 2014 Madame de Staël Prize for Cultural Values and member of the Scientific Committee of the House of European History, Brussels. Among her books: *Women and Men in Love. European Identities in the Twentieth Century* (2012); *Memory and Utopia. The Primacy of Intersubjectivity* (2007); *Europe in Love, Love in Europe* (1999); *Autobiography of a Generation. Italy 1968* (1996); *Fascism in Popular Memory* (1987).

Keynote lecture's title

Dialogues and Silences in Oral and Visual Stories

Which form do silences take in oral stories? My talk will start from this question to interpret some of the meanings of silence in oral memory and more generally in the history of subjectivity, on the basis of my previous research on the memory of fascism. I will then proceed to explore how the connection between silence and memory can be transposed to the study of visual memory and the interpretation of visual narratives, on the basis on my recent Ebook *Conversations on Visual Memory*.



ABSTRACTS

Dieter Reinisch, (Adjunct Professor in International Relations, Webster University; and Lecturer in History, University of Vienna) *Life stories and oral history in post-conflict societies: On trust and the role of the interviewer*

The Northern Irish Troubles are oftentimes described as a religious conflict, a description rejected by Irish Republican actors of the conflict. It has been argued that emotions, feelings, and subjective experiences carry a number of roles and functions and, thus, shape our research interests and decisions. Similarly, the appearance of the interviewer as much as the narrator's perception shape the story the narrators tell us in the interviews. Based on these considerations, I will discuss how Irish Republican women projected their own Catholic convictions on me, the interviewer, despite stressing that they are not overly religious or practising their Catholic belief. During 2009 and 2011, I interview 25 former Irish Republican women activists. These women, while acknowledging me, an Austrian, as a “neutral outsider to the conflict,” as one woman suggested, nevertheless, projected their own religious framework on me. As a consequence, these projections shaped their answers during the interviews. Furthermore, while these women emphasise that their political motivation for Republican activities is not religiously driven, the women were raised in a Catholic environment and, thus, these subjective experiences shape their answers and their attitudes towards the interviewer. In essence, this paper examines, first, how Catholic convictions are projected on the interviewer by narrators in Oral History projects on the Northern Ireland conflict and, second, what roles and functions these religious projects serve during the interview process.

Maria Adamopoulou, (2nd year HEC, EUI), *Migrants' eternal returns: return visits from West Germany to Greece and family strategies*

Transnationalism refers to immigrants' long-term attachment to their country of origin, as shown by participation in homeland politics, frequent returns home, consumption of cultural products from the homeland, the maintenance of transnational family structures, remittances or border-crossing entrepreneurial activity. These activities often lead to the creation of dense transnational networks linking immigrants' country of origin and their adopted homeland. The Federal Republic encouraged guest workers to maintain transnational bonds with their countries of origin. The foreign labor recruitment program, begun in 1955 (1960 for Greece) and brought to a halt in late 1973, was premised on the notion that foreign workers were temporary residents who would return to their homelands once their labor was no longer required. At least through the 1970s, German immigration policy encouraged immigrants to integrate just enough to be effective workers and to prevent them from being socially disruptive, but not enough to break their connection to their countries of origin. In the present paper I would like to examine the different functions of return visits as they are negotiated in the oral accounts of migrants, but also in the Greek press and audiovisual releases focusing mainly in the period between the late sixties and the early eighties. My argument is that the return visits were viewed as an opportune moment to refresh bonds with the sending country through reconnection with family, friends and the wider community.

Matteo Capasso, (Research Associate, Global Governance Programme) *In-Between Taḥālib (algae) and Jurdhān (rats): Oral Histories in Turbulent Times*

This paper discusses the vicissitudes, both obstacles and potentialities, which arose while collecting oral histories on the everyday lives of Libyans under al-Jamahiriyah in the aftermath of the events of 2011 that brought about the collapse of the Qaddafi regime. In a climate of suspicion and ongoing violence, the reconstruction of past memories inevitably triggered the necessity for interlocutors to position themselves vis-à-vis those events that changed the fate of the country. The paper aims to discuss how two main grand narratives (rebellion vs imperialist invasion) functioned as a filter to interpret the past – and the present - for many Libyans, translating into a Manichean vision of the world. In such a situation, the paper proceeds examining whether oral histories –and their analysis- can function as a space for reconciling and reflecting critically about the past, or they ultimately replicate structural relations of power

Catalina Andricioaei (2nd year HEC, EUI) *Parallel interviews: the spoken and the gestured,*

Drawing on an interview I conducted in 2017 with Diamanta, a Romanian Roma woman living in Nottingham, UK, my presentation aims to shed light on the question of audience(s), both present and expected, in oral history interviews. My case study is the story of the golden necklace and Diamanta's body language. In shedding light on the subtleties of an interview which in fact enclosed three stories for three separate audiences, I argue that expectations of audience(s), which include the interviewer herself, not only shape the exchange of stories, but also illuminate the position of the interviewer in the economy of the interview.

Turkay Gasimova, (3rd year HEC, EUI) *De-constructing the life a young Muslim Russian subject in Europe through personal letters*

The aim of this paper is to understand how life in Europe could be for a young Muslim coming from the far southern periphery of the Russian Empire to study in Brussel at the end of the nineteenth century. In comparison with his father Mirza Fatali Akhundov who is considered one of the well-known intellectuals of his time in the Russian Empire, the story of Rashid bey Akhundov is known only to few historians. After graduating from Tiflis Classic gymnasium, Rashid Bey continued his studies at the University of Brussels studying engineering during 1874-1882.¹ The letters Rashid sent home to his family in Tiflis reveal a lot about his life in Brussel and the challenges that he had encountered. Altogether Rashid sent 53 letters from Brussel to his father and at least six letters to his mother and sister. Unfortunately, not all these letters have survived, and the majority of the letters that Rashid's family had sent to him is lost. Properly studied, exchange of letters between Akhundov and his son Rashid would contribute a great deal to our understanding of Akhundov as a visionary novelist and reformist intellectual. Furthermore, most importantly these letters provide extensive knowledge on the first European experience by a young Muslim who was intermediary through whom Akhundov tried to see the real Europe.² Rashid's extensive responses to his father's curious questions and his observations about European society reveal the nature of the relationship between him and his father, his depressive personality and the deep sense of helplessness that eventually made him to take his own life.

Aleksandra Tobiasz, (3rd year HEC, EUI) *Gombrowicz's Diary - between the literary and ego documental perspective*

In my contribution I would like to address the issue of egodocumental attitude to sources. Therefore, instead of defining what the egodocument is, I will focus on the approach to personal writings which is called "egodocumental". What motivates me to study this perspective and apply it in my dissertation, is the attempt to "existentialize" history and to accentuate its phenomenological dimension which poses the question: how we relate to the past, experience our temporality and not what the past was or how we can know it. Paying attention to the egodocumental perspective acknowledges diversity of each research and allows broader applicability of the concept to differing areas of research. I will focus on diary which is the central and most important source in my dissertation. Whereas the traditional definition of egodocument does not describe well my sources, the egodocumental approach seems applicable. It is characterized by an attempt to take into account the subjective dimension of the texts (emotions, values, personal views) which not necessarily can be generically classified as egodocuments.

Svetlana Poleschuk, (4th year SPS, HEC) *Academic Careers in a Rapidly Changing World: Biographies of Academics Who Stayed or Left Belarus After the Year 1991*

In my PhD project I examine academic careers of a single cohort of Belarusian scholars who started their tertiary education at the beginning of the 1990s. I am particularly interested to describe and understand how the fall of the Iron Curtain and the specific historic situation after the collapse of the Soviet Union have affected three types of Belarusian academics: those who graduated from a university in Belarus and then continued their career outside the country, those who pursued careers within the country, and those who returned to Belarus after their studies or employment abroad. In

addition to the three migration patterns (Stayers, Leavers, and Returners), I differentiate between ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ sciences as well as gender. The life course theory is used to organize the data collection and analysis. 67 retrospective semi-structured problem-oriented qualitative interviews cover both the chronology and each individual’s interpretations of transition activities and experiences in moving in and out of status passages in the domains of education, employment, and family. In my presentation I will focus on theoretical and methodological issues of studying biographies via qualitative lifecourse research and also I will discuss some of the preliminary results based on the analysis of one third of the interview data.

Adrian-George Matus, (2nd year HEC, EUI) *“A fatherless generation”? Roots of 1968ers.*

The youth movements from late 1960s have been the focus of a range of different interpretations. ‘Traditionally’, historians focused on the national perspective in order to explain the student revolts. With a greater availability of comparative studies, as well as by using interviews, recent scholarship changed the focus from reading archives or articles of the period to more dynamic avenues.

Among others, already Tony Judt, in *Postwar*, did a similar attempt to explain the evolution of the 1968ers through a generational approach that wittily avoids reductionist national perspectives.³ In my presentation, I intend to focus on the pre-history of the 1968ers from Hungary and Romania, that is the postwar conditions that made possible the ‘1968’ protests in Eastern and Central Europe. My aim is to scrutinize how historical processes such as de- Nazification, Stalinism or de-Stalinization, or events like the 1956 Hungarian Uprising or deportations contributed to the formation of a new generation.

My first aim is to understand the family environment. In some cases, as Gildea, Mark and Warring demonstrate, the 1968ers came from families with an interwar Communist legacy.⁴ A point that still needs more emphasis is the relationship with their parents. In many cases, due to the specific context of East-Central Europe, the absence of one parent marked their childhood. The reasons are multiple: some of their parents died in Holocaust, others were deported in Soviet Union. To what extent such traumas contributed in their later protest manner?

Then, I will move on to the formative books of the Hungarian and Romanian 1968ers. By analyzing their early adolescence readings, but also their teenage philosophical interests, I intend to see how books formed their *Weltanschauung*. In Hungary, Budapest youngsters read with a critical eye New Left books already in late 1950s, while in Bucharest, their literary and philosophical curiosities were totally antagonistic. In some Romanian circles, Nietzsche was preferred to ‘young Marx’ and spirituality to political engagement. The aim of this subchapter is to map ‘post-Zhdanov cultural trends’ allowed by Hungarian Communist Party or Romanian Communist Party, but also to explore the ‘underground’ readings that matured in early 1960s. The question to be answered is: what determined such large cultural and epistemological variations inside two countries that roughly had the same institutional post- Stalinist framework?

A particular event for those living in Budapest was the Hungarian Uprising from 1956, which deserves a particular attention. When it comes to the topic of Hungarian Revolution, most of scholars readily agree that it had a long-term impact on how to protest against the state, across the whole East-Central Europe. It is still uncertain, though, the formative role of this event for the 1968 protests from East-Central Europe.

Lastly, starting from 1950s radios and even TVs became consumer goods available for many more people. In parallel, radio became a powerful tool in penetrating the 'Iron Curtain' through stations such as Radio Free Europe, established in 1951.

For the first time, media was not only essential in informing population, but also to entertain people through music. Thus, both state-directed radios and 'foreign radios' (Radio Free Europe) very soon capitalized this feature, by treating youth as a distinct target group for broadcasting. Two subsequent questions emerge: How functioned the dialectic between youngsters and state-directed radio station censorship? To what extent Radio Free Europe influenced aesthetical tastes of Hungarian and Romanian teenagers until mid-1960s?

Uladzimir Valodzin, (2nd year HEC, EUI) *A well-forgotten story: Aleksandr Udodov and his unusable past*

Protagonist of this story is absent from Belarusian public memory. His life-story may not be used by neither part of the country's political spectrum for its political objectives. The authorities and official historiography are not fond to recall that printing leaflets (of whatever content) was illegal in the Soviet Union. Human rights organisations and liberals prefer to remember non-violent dissent. Leftists and anarchists disregard all kinds of nationalism. Conservative and nationalist opposition concentrates on memory of Belarusian nationalists, whether violent or not, whether connected to [German] Nazis or not. Finally, for Russian nationalists from Russia and researchers of Russian nationalism in Russia he is third-level activist from the periphery not worthy of mentioning. It seems that dissident, murderer and Russian nationalist from Minsk Aleksandr Udodov is doomed for oblivion. Udodov, born in 1946 in Belarusian town Babrujsk, was son of a military officer and ethnic Russian. Together with two fellow high school students he created an underground cell of socialist revolutionists. However, one member betrayed the group. Udodov and Pomogaev killed the traitor in 1963; they were 17 at that time. In 1964 the two were sentenced for 10 years of 'corrective' camps for the creation of 'anti-Soviet' organisation, 'anti-Soviet' agitation and murder. In the camp Udodov converted to Russian nationalism. After serving full sentence he received Israeli visa and left Soviet Union. First, he settled in Rome and then probably moved to United States. For some years he published his articles in Russian nationalist émigré press, then his traces disappear.

Gabriella Romano, (Birkbeck College, University of London), *Dealing with silence/s*

I focused on LGBT oral history projects and over the years I had to deal with silence/s on several occasions. From pain to self-censorship, from peer pressure to fear of being misunderstood, silence, though frustrating, is always a highly significant answer in itself. It should be interrogated, commented upon and taken into account when reporting and elaborating interview work. In the presentation I will illustrate this issue by giving examples based on my previous written and audio-visual work.

Victoria Witkowski (EUI), *Between Myth & Reality: Tracing the Cultural Representation of the Fascist Empire through the Life and After-life of Rodolfo Graziani*