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The Importance of Oral History in (Industrial) Heritagisation

Melinda Harlov-Csortán

Introduction

Oral history includes both the subjective interpretation of the past (Gyáni 2000: 131) and the methodology that records, documents, and analyses that interpretation. The former, a personal understanding, experience, and/or memory of a past event, enriches the “official narrative”, the historical aspect, and provides the investigation with an individual, interpersonal, and human-focused aspect (Thompson 1978: 6). Among others, its two major advantages are the participatory and plurality aspects of the narrative creation. However, especially due to their co-creation feature, oral history projects, like other types of research, can be influenced by the researcher’s personality and opinion, and the general ideology of the time when the research is conducted (High 2014). Oral history should never be taken as an objective account as it evidently offers a personal interpretation which might throw light upon multiple layers and understandings of the same event. A typical period to showcase the implications of oral history is the Cold War era, when due to top-down oppressive political systems in Central and Eastern Europe it was impossible to criticise the working conditions of the industrial labour. After the political change in Hungary, for instance, the interpretation almost reversed the former viewpoint when the whole period was described as completely negative and harmful (Alabán 2017). Such mainstream interpretations can affect the personal perspectives as well.

Despite its potentially biased and subjective narration, this methodology is especially of value when the research period needs to be investigated as the authenticity or trustworthiness of the available written or material traces might be questionable. This is usually the case with research projects that focus on periods that have been re-evaluated over time. The establishment of the Oral History Archive within the Hungarian 1956 Institute in the 1980s is a case in point. At the time of its foundation, written material about the revolution of 1956 was not yet available, so the only form of sources available for researchers were oral history testimonies (Kozák 1995). Hanák and Kövér both emphasise the “still” and “already” aspects of oral history examples which show that the interviewees’ memory is still vivid and they are already capable to talk about the given past (Hanák/Kövé 1995: 94).

Oral history was the type of research through which underrepresented social communities and their interpretations and memories were able to enter the academic debate. For instance, the female narratives of the industrial culture could be researched and discussed with the help of oral history (such as biographical interviews) throughout different continents. Not only new perspectives could be analysed, but also a research focus formed around how contemporary ideology – such as Catholi-

cism (Arango 1993) or Socialism (Schüle 2001) – defined the possible choices and roles female members of this social unit could fulfil.

Interestingly, many scholars point to the challenges the new technical possibilities (like audio-video recording, online access to interviews conducted by others) put on oral history as a methodology. These challenges include both theoretical questions – even before the introduction of the new European data protection regulations – and actual realisation threats. Oral historians, especially those dealing with traumatic experiences, unquestionably play a significant role in forming narratives of a given recent event (Sommer/Quinlan 2002). In such cases that are swayed by emotions, the adaptation of new technologies which can document numerous aspects instantly as well as provide multiple methods for modification retrospectively can threaten the ultimate requirement of objectivity (Sloan/Cave 2014). Similarly, while new technologies make oral history research projects more accessible to a wider audience, they also complicate the process of protecting (anonymising) the sources (Larson/Boys 2014) or analysing the represented narrations. The same media can either strive for objectivity or allude to subjectivity (for instance, by using sarcasm or overemphasised emotions) of the narration, the distinction of which cannot be decided without background information of the given case. This was the case in numerous Hungarian movies such as *Falfűrók* (1985) about the political change criticising Socialism by sarcastically depicting industrial workers' everyday life. Those movies were directed in a documentary-like style with non-professional actors and seemingly strong sociological messages. Accordingly, this kind of movies could be interpreted in opposing ways. In order to ensure the validity and reliability of an oral history project, it is important to incorporate other sources with which the researched question is compared and contrasted. Oral history alone cannot provide suitable and professional data (Szabolcs 2001: 46).

One of the most common cultural practices of remembering the past is to heritagise it. The terms “heritage” or “patrimony” have incorporated diverse meanings, forms, and effects in different countries and areas of life over the last five decades (Larsen/Logan 2018). A very complex and often overlapping typology of heritage forms has been established during this period, yet without having been commonly adapted internationally (Fejérdy 2011). Such variety shows the richness of this process, but also challenges its adaptability. For instance, we differentiate “heritage industry” and “industrial heritage”. The former refers to the process and apparatus through which (industrial) heritage can be commodified and instrumentalised in order to become an “opportunity space” (Günay 2014: 98) in the post-industrial area. Looking at heritage as a source of economic benefit, besides its identity-forming role, is important not only to protect the heritage that has been revitalised (as this process might lead to Disneyfication, gentrification, and other forms of transforming the authentic values and past), but also to investigate the social practices that capture history at different levels (Walsh 1992). Among others, two outstanding UNESCO World Heritage Council representatives, Ron van Oers and Francesco Bandarin, called for a stronger connection between socio-economic development and conservation strategies in order to sustain what they define as the Historic Urban Landscape (Bandarin/van Oers 2012).

At the same time, industrial heritage is defined by The International Committee for the Conservation of the Industrial Heritage (TICCIH) in its *Nizhny Tagil Charter*

for the *Industrial Heritage* (2003) as follows: “Industrial heritage consists of the remains of industrial culture which are of historical, technological, social, architectural or scientific value.” The Charter continues by explaining the significance and features of these values and says: “These values are intrinsic to the site itself, its fabric, components, machinery, and setting, in the industrial landscape, in written documentation, and also in the intangible records of industry contained in human memories and customs” (TICCIH 2003). Here, it is again important to differentiate intangible heritage as a category from intangible records mentioned in the official text. As early as March 2001, a working definition of the intangible heritage was formulated, which was endorsed two years later at the 32nd Session of UNESCO’s General Conference in Paris (UNESCO 2001; UNESCO 2016) – it is an interesting coincidence that both categories, intangible heritage and industrial heritage, were defined by international experts and hence institutionalised in the same year. According to UNESCO’s definition, intangible cultural heritage

means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity (UNESCO 2003).

Accordingly, intangible cultural heritage can be realised in “oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; traditional craftsmanship” (UNESCO 2003). The goal of the convention was to provide tools and structures for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage by raising awareness, ensuring respect, and promoting cooperation. It categorised intangible cultural heritage cases that urgently need protection, those that can be part of a representative list and those that are evaluated as being well-protected.

The definition of industrial heritage incorporates orally transmitted aspects of industrial life as one aspect of the totality of industrial heritage besides material objects, locations, and sites. Oral history interviews and narratives about the social practices of industrial communities are a crucial part of researching, preserving, and interpreting the industrial heritage especially in our contemporary post-industrial and participatory-focused world. This can be seen in recent industrial heritage research projects (Shackel/Roller 2013: 2 ff.), museums¹, and even in education. For instance, the Michigan Technological University has had a course on industrial heritage for more than ten years as a core course and now as an SS 5501 course in their curriculum on Industrial Communities in the MS Program in Industrial Archaeology (Martin 2008: 83; MS Program 2018). This paper discusses key aspects which oral history both as

1 For instance, the Workshops Rail Museum in Queensland, Australia named intangible heritage aspects as its number one “key areas of industrial heritage that are in urgent need of protecting”, and hence focused on oral histories, among others (Mate 2017: 19).

source and methodology can have in the management, establishment, maintenance, research, and interpretation of industrial heritage in our contemporary deindustrialised world.

Oral History Is Heritage

Since the early 2000s, people themselves through their practice and knowledge have become heritage. Intangible cultural heritage as a category is one example to acknowledge this new aspect, which is similar to the notion of the “spirit of the place/genius loci”. The latter notion connects intangible values and sites and was declared in 2008 in the *Quebec Declaration on the Preservation of the Spirit of Place* by ICOMOS (ICOMOS 2008). ICOMOS is the non-governmental international network of experts for the conservation and protection of cultural heritage places, as well as one of three advisory boards of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention. Hence, even one of the leading professional units focusing especially on architectural and archaeological heritage acknowledges and emphasises the importance of the human aspect as part of heritage.

However, the scientific recognition of the “common people” and their “everyday lives” has no long history, and this is particularly the case with industrial culture (Eriksen 1989: 279). Nor did the social expectations on non-intellectual units of the community such as people working in agricultural and industrial segments appreciate the importance to remember and value their biographical data or lifestyle (Klaniczay 1990). One can point to many triggering effects that lead to the acknowledgement of oral history as a kind of heritage in these areas. An example of this is the elimination of the tangible aspects of the given past (Walczak 2005: 311 ff.). This can happen either by forced transformation – as was the case with the top-down alteration of Hungary in the previous political system from a mainly agricultural state to heavy industry – or a “natural” process such as the replacement of former production tools, methods, and even locations with modern technology. In these cases, personal interpretations, knowledge, and some remaining segments of the practices can serve as heritage, i.e. elements of the past that are adopted or still applied in our contemporary world.

Oral history can also serve as heritage when the tangible and intangible aspects of a location cannot be compared with each other, for instance, when the community has changed (Robertson 1991). The 20th century, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, has experienced numerous community transformations, and, in those instances, the tangible apparatus of a settlement, for example, has a different history than the local community. The “new” community might have no time or possibility to establish “their unique” built surroundings and formulate a different understanding and usage of the existing physical sphere that can be investigated and researched mainly through their oral history testimonies. Thus, historical changes themselves or the associated social transformations that might not happen on the physical level can be analysed by means of oral history (Thompson 2000: 2). For example, in Hungary each industrial segment was encouraged to compile its own reminiscences and contemporary values in the mid-1950s (Közlöny 1954). The textile industry, among others, accomplished that task, from which a significant national collection was then formed. Unfortunately, as the industry and its actors ran out of business and budget in the

context of the political change, the exhibition shrank and lost its location. In the capital, an extensive textile factory used to operate, of whose original structure almost nothing remains, or has been modified to an extreme extent, which has eliminated its authenticity. After many unsuccessful attempts, the remaining part of the above-mentioned collection was moved to the premises of the former textile factory in a newly built architecture. As neither the building nor the collection could accurately and authentically represent the formerly existing Hungarian textile industry, the members of the newly formed museum conducted a series of research and numerous oral history interviews with the former employees to enrich and increase the value of the new institution. Due to the time frame of these oral history investigations and the age of the interviewees, those materials represent the deindustrialisation period and complete the otherwise small remnants of an important aspect of Hungarian industrial heritage (Martos/Jankó 2014).

Oral history testimonies are a kind of verbal self-identification, and accordingly can assume the roles of identity enforcement and protection (Véteszi 2004: 164), which are clearly among the functions cultural heritage exercises as well. As Irina Bokova, the Director-General of UNESCO, stated on the 18th General Assembly of the World Heritage Convention in 2011: “World Heritage is a building block for peace and sustainable development. It is a source of identity and dignity for local communities, a wellspring of knowledge and strength to be shared” (UNESCO 2013: 20). The notion that heritage can be the source of identity is also expressed in the fact that the cultural values of the heritage examples can be classified, among others, as identity values, just as their social values enforce the establishment of the social and cultural identity (Feilden/Jokilehto 1998: 18, 20).

Both cultural heritage and oral history are understood as examples that connect the past with the present. The role of cultural heritage is basically defined as follows: heritage is “the past used for both present and potential future purposes” (CHCFE 2015: 36). This notion, which was explicitly at the centre of heritage management, is still relevant today and is being implemented continuously. Even today, conferences and publications dealing with the forming ideology of what, by whom, for whom, and how should be bestowed, which alludes to all three time phases – past, present, and future – have open questions.² Because oral history testimonies are realised in the present, they are also influenced by it. For example, a contemporary identity or viewpoint might influence the narrative of the past (Gyáni 2000: 131). Many oral history researchers point out that even if interviewees on many occasions tend to adjust their narratives to the grand narrative, especially in the case of significant historical events (Niethammer 2002: 108), the individual voice can always be decoded with the help, for instance, of the analysis of the expressions and tonalities used during the testimony (Kisantal/Szeberényi 2003). The core notion of UNESCO World Heritage is also that connection between the universal and the personal or community-owned past. UNESCO’s World Heritage List tends to enumerate all those examples that are not only part of the given communities’ past and value system but also play important roles in universal humanity: “World Heritage sites belong to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located” (UNESCO 2018).

² For instance, the session titled “The Past in the Present: Mediating Cultural Heritage” at a recent conference at the University of Toronto (University of Toronto 2017).

Oral History as a Tool in Heritagisation

Oral history as a methodology has been adapted by many disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, and ethnography. Ethnographers used to collect, document, and analyse the traditions, celebrations, songs, and tales of the rural society. Moreover, written versions of the biographical interviews appeared at a very early stage, consciously directing the interviewees to create a first personal, singular narrative (for instance, Hoppál et. al. 1974). Other disciplines frequently used research more on the macro-level and questionnaire-based investigations to analyse the connection between economic processes and their social implications (see Héthy/Makó 1972). In these cases, it was usually the perceptions of the community rather than the personal experience that were emphasised. Initially, historians used oral history mainly as a methodology for memoir-recording, especially when such testimony could be adapted as a witness narrative to an important historical event (Bódy 2000). In such cases, the personal narratives again served as a justification or opposing point of view to the grand narrative (Kovács 1992: 89). More recent approaches focus on the possibility of oral history to express and research the coexistence of multiple narratives (Kovács/Melegh 2000), or, among others, on looking at the emotional and psychological influences of the research objective (Botond 1991: 97 f.).

All these adaptations serve multiple goals of cultural heritage management. For instance, participatory action and representation of the practitioners/interviewees and/or the whole community are important requirements for the acceptance of a nominated intangible cultural heritage (Thorell 2013). Storytelling and re-enactment as heritage interpretation tools based on oral history research findings are widely and successfully used throughout the world (for instance, see Zotica/Malaescu 2015). Similarly, the experiential aspect and the representation power for the community through multiple narratives are also key factors in both the nomination procedure and the interpretation of a heritage site (Brugman 2008; Mathieu 2002). This is especially crucial when through heritagisation (that involves physical conservation as well as interpretation) the complexity of the represented past is threatened. For example, with the aestheticization of an industrial or noble location, the hardship of the working community could be still represented via oral history without mentioning the flourishing number and types of heritage values that should be equally acknowledged and presented by suitable methodology (Hawke 2012). For example, at the Massa Museum in Miskolc-Felsőhárom, Hungary, or at the Hungarian Open Air Museum in Szentendre, Hungary, where former industrial (iron metallurgy) and agricultural lifestyles are the subjects of interpretation, the guides, who have all worked before in the respective fields, and the possibility of participation (trying out certain methodologies) are the key attractions for visitors to come to these otherwise not easily accessible locations.

Like in academia, where multiple disciplines are using the methodology (Kopijn 1998), oral history should be adapted even more effectively in diverse fields of heritage management. Besides protecting the defined heritage value when, for instance, tangible heritage is difficult to understand (Holtorf 2010), oral history can play a role in empowering the community and ensuring sustainability and mutual understanding (Landorf 2009). Oral history as a methodology can document personal opinions and emotions that can contribute to the uniqueness of the given heritage, which is not just

the prerequisite for the nomination process but also essential in the heritagisation and management processes. Some of the selection criteria discussed in the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention are clearly alluding to the need of uniqueness such as “to represent a masterpiece”, “to be [an] exceptional example”, “to contain the most important and significant” (UNESCO 2017: 25 f.). Oral heritage methodology, while documenting individual interpretations, also provides insights into the entire community and their values. Such interconnectedness of the personal experience and the corresponding community is an envisaged role for the heritage examples in forms of community engagement and cohesion (Waterton/Watson 2011). Similarly, the more personally the represented past is explained, the more it stays in the individual’s memory (Vértesi 2004: 170), which can be seen as a sustainable protection methodology and an effective justification of the heritage’s significance (Howard 2003). Moreover, through the common or connective human experience, both mutual understanding and accessibility of a given heritage is increased (Avellino 2016).

Both heritage and oral history are experiential, and heading towards digitalisation in our contemporary world (Saou-Dufrene 2014). Both can be seen as an interpretation or narrative creating process which is connected to the historical past. However, none of them can be identified as each other’s one-to-one representation, because oral history documents the human experience of the historical past (Vansina 1984), while heritage is “what people make of their history to make themselves feel good”, as David Lowenthal, one of the key patrons of heritage studies, expressed in one of his talks (Clout 2018). Similarly close but slightly different is the connection between memory and oral history, and memory and heritage, as oral history methodology recalls memory (Samuel 1994), while heritage practice often creates memory (Benton 2010). All these connecting aims, roles, and practices clearly show the numerous possibilities oral history both as “product” and methodology can have in heritage management processes. Especially in the case of industrial heritage examples where the tangible elements are more subject to elimination or alteration, oral history can have a crucial role in heritagisation. An outstanding example of that is realised by the colleagues of the German Mining Museum in Bochum, who are collecting and digitalising oral history testimonies by representatives of the vanishing mining society in the Ruhr Area (Stiftung Geschichte des Ruhrgebiets/Deutsches Bergbau-Museum Bochum 2018).

Conclusion

This paper aimed to highlight the connection between heritage management and oral history. Even though at the beginning, the discourse and processes regarding heritage were mostly material-based, realised mainly by architects and monument protectionists, oral history used to go unnoticed in the role of providing information and access to the human experience, knowledge, and practices. Oral history both as data and methodology has numerous wide-ranging potential for heritage studies and practices. It can ensure the authenticity requirement of the nomination process and has the potential to unite bottom-up and top-down processes. By better connecting, for instance, the local community and the group of experts, the highly controversial UNESCO World Heritage supremacy of Outstanding Universal Value can be overcome. Simi-

larly, by enforcing the participatory action of the “heritage owners” in the heritagisation process, community regeneration and identity building can be supporting as well, which is an especially crucial task when, for instance, such values are threatened, as is the case in the deindustrialisation of a mining town. One of the most appreciated outcomes of adapting oral history methodology to any field (theoretical investigations and practical projects alike) is its capability to polarise and multiply the narratives, and accordingly to point to possibly new outcomes and aspects. Emphasising the oral and human aspect, oral heritage can decrease the distance between intangible and tangible heritage, as well as the represented past and contemporary issues. The latter also contributes to the accessibility and validity of heritage examples.

Despite the various junctures, there are many threats or possible difficulties in the adaptation of oral history to heritage management. Oral history testimonies might be influenced by numerous circumstances and actors, and as they are created retrospectively in a certain way, they could be emotionally biased. Oral history can be the subject of beautifying the past or accusing other participants, and hence serving contemporary propagandistic goals. However, it can draw attention to connections and networks useful for researchers and combine personal and communal memories. By this means, oral history can promote mutual understanding and identity and settlement reinforcement, which are some of the most crucial tasks, among others, for industrial heritage sites in the age of deindustrialisation.

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Abstract

The UNESCO World Heritage Committee and its professional institutions, the international body of cultural and natural heritage, emphasise the importance of the human aspect, the individuals and groups who are involved in the heritage context: the authentic owner/practitioner; the contemporary local or inheritor; the professional, who understands; the policy maker, who protects, etc. Accordingly, in the heritagisation process, oral memories and interactions play defining roles on many levels. They can justify the heritage management process as well as construct what should be valued. This paper looks at this complex status and the roles oral history examples can have in the research and management process. The paper focuses on the intangible aspect within the category of industrial heritage as the specialised committee of UNESCO's World Heritage Council defines and categorises it. Accordingly, it presents an international perspective, although heavily European-centred, as many critics have already expressed. The time frame focuses on the one and a half decades after 2003, when TICCIH, the International Committee for the Conservation of Industrial Heritage defined its objective; however, previous practices and research examples are mentioned as well. The paper is based on the comparative and textual analysis of theoretical texts (of oral history research), general guidelines (such as charters of the international

heritage organisations), and case studies. The aim of the paper is not to provide a chronological overview of the overlaps between industrial and intangible heritage management in the European discourse but to point out the effective realisation of incorporating oral history into (industrial) heritage studies.