

THE CYPRUS ORAL HISTORY AND LIVING MEMORY PROJECT

NOVEMBER 1, 2010 - OCTOBER 31, 2011

Report on the plan to do oral history research on the historical events of 1974, in the context of Cyprus (Deliverable #12)

Context

Cyprus, one of the smallest countries in the European Union, is also the last divided country in Europe, Nicosia its last divided city. Winning its independence from Great Britain in 1960, Cyprus has been roiled in ethnic conflict, violence, and division almost from the start; everyone of a certain age remembers the troubles of 1963-1967. The 1974 Turkish invasion and subsequent occupation sealed the fate of Cyprus for decades.

The troubles of the last 50 years are not unrelated to Cyprus' strategic location at the eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea, a place that has long attracted and continues to draw the great world powers. Rome ruled, as did Istanbul and England. Richard the Lion Hearted took a piece of the island on his way to the Crusades, Paul the Apostle was given 39 strokes with a lash by the Romans for preaching the Gospel, Othello's Castle is on the southern coast, and Lazarus died on the island. Cyprus has always been a storied jewel of the Mediterranean.

Today UN peace keepers patrol the buffer zone between north and south, and England maintains a massive presence, tens of thousands of military personnel, and two air bases (which were used by the US most recently to launch into Afghanistan and Iraq) constituting 10% of the land mass. Some Cypriots complain that the great powers see Cyprus as little more than a huge, unsinkable aircraft carrier.

While there has not been a shot fired since 1999, and while the border between the north and the south opened in 2003, for the generation now in its sixties, memories of the early days are both vivid and raw, and, indeed, for most Cypriots of every age, Cyprus still bleeds. That bleeding—its interpretative meaning and its pervasive imaginative power today—is the focus of this work.

Purpose

Our project is simply this: to record in notes and photographs and sketches, on audio or video, the voices and words of the people of Cyprus themselves, from every community, to capture their memories, understand their specific meaning-perspectives, illuminate their lives. Our guiding light is *every person a philosopher in his / her own life*. We will create as rich and varied an archive as we can; we hope participants will see themselves in this collection as three-dimensional, grass-roots makers of history, and that their descendants will better understand how their ancestors—like all human beings: free and fated; fated and free—shuffled through this mortal coil. We hope, too, that future historians will find material to aid in their own searches for deeper meanings and fuller understandings. We hope, finally, to add ground-level, individual perspectives toward uncovering and teaching the conflict, and in this way, through oral history, to assist the process of truth-telling and reconciliation.

Method

Until recently academic historians have tended to view oral historians as poor country cousins, and oral history with deep suspicion, noting that oral sources often get the facts wrong, remember things selectively, conflate or distort events, bend their accounts to put themselves in a better light or to serve some present agenda, and more. Oral historians have responded by trying to get it right, meeting high standards of documentary work, for example, but historians, like cops, ought to know not to take every eye-witness at his word, and like lawyers ought to meet all testimony with skepticism. More recently oral historians have made a critical turn, arguing that subjectivity, and memory itself, are themselves worthy of attention.

Perhaps the leading figure in this turn is Professor Alessandro Portelli. Conducting interviews in a town in southern Italy, Portelli (1991) was struck by the repeated errors informants made concerning certain events, and more interesting, the patterns of those errors, or the collective mis-readings of historical facts. A pivotal example for Portelli was the death of a young worker named Luigi Trastulli, who was killed by the police in a violent street demonstration in 1949. The written documentary record was clear: Trastulli was killed in clashes over Italy's decision to join NATO. The consensus of those interviewed in the 1970's, however, people who had actually witnessed and participated in the events, placed Trastulli in the militant clashes following mass firings of workers in 1953. Why? For Portelli a light went on: the NATO issue had lost all of its resonance 25 years later; the events of 1953, however, had forever changed life for workers in the area, and it still hurt. This was not an instance of the weakness of oral history, Portelli concluded, but indeed an example of its singular value: "Oral sources tell us not just what people did," he wrote, "but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they now think they did."

Memory itself, always dynamic, shifting, unsettled, and *contested*, has become a worthwhile subject for attention and study. And so while oral history standing alone is surely inadequate, often distorted, and always incomplete, any attempt to write history that ignores or displaces first-person accounts and oral sources is wrong *by definition*—wrong in the sense of inaccurate, but also wrong in the sense of immoral.

One of Portelli's colleagues, Luisa Passerini (1979), found similar gaps and distortions as she interviewed Italian workers about the fascist period from 1922-1943, and she came to a similar conclusion: "Irrelevancies and discrepancies must not be denied," she argued, "but these will never be understood if we take oral sources merely as factual statements." Silences, inconsistencies, shadows, and inventions—all of this can be seen, instead, as forms of culture, and expressions of cultural/meaning shifts over time. All of it is fair game and raw material for the oral historian, for as Studs Terkel announced, "In their remembering are their truths."

Theoretical Underpinnings

The design of this project is drawn upon theoretical underpinnings associated with the role of *narrative* in people's lives and essentially in knowledge construction. Bruner (1986) differentiated between two distinct ways that humans order experience. He called the first one paradigmatic, which refers to organising thought that is logico-scientific, based on reasons. The second way that humans order experience, according to Bruner, is narrative and deals with the creation of stories. As he described, narrative is used to refer to a way of sculpting and structuring information through expressions of different media into readily understood forms that

guide learners' comprehension; and to a cognitive mode that learners use to make sense out of information or experience. Narrative then becomes part of how people understand the world they live in and they serve as a way of communicating that understanding to others. The corollary of the status of narrative is that, as Graesser, Olde, and Klettke (2002) have argued, it has a privileged status among various types of discourse.

Although narrative is as old as Aesop, in contemporary culture it is expressed through a growing diversity of different media such as books, plays, and films, and can be experienced in different ways. Moreover, because of narrative's dominance as a form of communication (White, 1981) it has been examined throughout the years in a number of different disciplines such as education, sociology, philosophy, history, fiction, film, and others.

Stories are used every day as a way of making sense of and communicating events in the world. Movies, books, televisions, and everyday conversations are filled with the telling of stories (Schank & Berman, 2002). Stories are essentially a subset of the narrative genre and describe a series of actions and experiences made by a number of real or imaginary characters (Ricoeur, 1981). Stories form a natural vehicle and means of educating students not only about their cultural and historical roots but also about the scientific descriptions of 'reality' (Egan, 1986). Researchers have contended that stories have the potential to influence people's understandings and beliefs, and essentially, promote a societal and cultural change (Schank & Berman, 2002; Brock, Strange, and Green, 2002).

Oral history concerns itself with memory and meaning-making, and recognizes that for all human beings meaning is causal: we act based on the meanings we construct and share through language and culture. Oral history is the painstaking work of developing stories one by one. Some find this work discouraging, but we find in it the essence of freedom. After all, we live in a world of detail, and diversity just is—oral history foregrounds diversity, multiplicity, detail, specificity, perspective, meaning and interpretation on the ground. Oral historians must simultaneously do the historian's work of searching to understand what happened in the past, and the ethnographer's job of trying to understand the meaning events have for actors in situations. Oral history is by its nature a form of wildly interdisciplinary revisionist history, and that's not all bad.

The Oral History Association (www.oralhistory.org) states that:

Oral history is a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events. Oral history is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written word, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s and now using 21st-century digital technologies.

The importance of conducting oral history research is tremendous as in bringing together all persons interested in oral history to collect and interpret human memories, fosters knowledge and human dignity. The basic work of oral history is to collect memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews (Ritchie, 2003).

Oral historians ask, "How do people make sense of their experiences and their lives?" As we proceed we note that there is never a single story to tell, but rather each story is embedded in many other stories. We seek out those people Studs Terkel called, "the etceteras of the world," the extraordinary ordinary people who might tell their truths against all conditioned clichés, speaking in the "poetry of the everyday."

The focus is life as it is *lived*, meaning as it is *constructed* by people in their circumstances—something not easily fitted into disciplines or departments. This leads us to approaches that are person-centered and unapologetically subjective. Far from a weakness, the voice of the *person*, the subject's own account, is the singular *achievement* of this work. These

are actually ancient approaches to understanding human affairs, relatively new only to social science researchers.

The COHP Plan

A mapping exercise will be conducted early in the process in order to sketch out what has already been done both formally and informally in Cyprus. We will identify gaps and needs, and we will build upon what is there. This exercise will develop a more nuanced sense of how this project can augment and accelerate what has been undertaken so far in Cyprus. Some oral history efforts include the oral history archive of Northern Cyprus, run by the Eastern Mediterranean Cultural Heritage Research Center, the oral history training for school teachers by Leyla Neyzi at Sabanci University, the Euro-Clio Cyprus Association for Historical Dialogue and Research and the documents found in the Envelope of Cyprus, and the Cyprus Oral History Archives by the Turkish Ministry of Education. There are also projects contacted by the Sociopolitical Studies Institute (www.ikme.eu), based on oral histories of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots who lived in mixed villages in Cyprus prior to the partition, and a similar “mixed villages” project by the Association of Historical Dialogue and Research; projects about the missing persons in Cyprus including the work of the Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus, the book of Turkish Cypriot reporter Sevgul Uludag entitled “The oysters who lost their pearls - untold stories for the missing persons the mass graves and memories from the past of Cyprus” and documentaries by Antonis Agkastiniotis called “Voice of blood,” and by the Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation, as well as Giannis Papadakis’ book entitled “Echoes from the Dead Zone” an ethnographic research based on narratives.

There may be more, but these are partial and selective efforts and our goal is universal and comprehensive: we want all the excluded voices of the widest variety of people who lived the events of 1974 from different angles and in a range of capacities, as inhabitants, soldiers, refugees, students, relatives, friends, men and women, girls and boys. This project seeks the voices of all, including those of Greek-Cypriots, Turkish-Cypriots, and settlers in order to create a usable archive of and for the people of Cyprus. It will also include people from the younger generation who have lived the events and their aftermath through the impact on others. The narrations of people will be categorized in a way that reflects the different age groups and the different capacities and circumstances under which people experienced the events.

The foreign experiences used here (from the United States and South Africa, for example) will be twofold: 1) stories with overlapping and similar historical backgrounds, which are contextually comparable, for example, issues pertaining to peace education, ethnic conflict, war and occupation, truth and reconciliation, and 2) stories that are useful examples of oral history research methodology.

Participants in this oral history research will be fully informed about the method used which involves the use of the real names rather than pseudonyms. It is noted that the use of real names may lead to silencing or to avoid disclosing information and events, due to the sensitive issue of publicizing personal data, which is a drawback; yet, on the other hand, the use of real names is the strength of this type of research, as it provides a certain kind of validity and authenticity to the account, as it is connected to a known, real person and his/her story. Also in this case participants are concerned about giving a more accurate and personalized account. Therefore, one participation criterion is individuals’ willingness to disclose their names and sign the consent form.

The Cyprus National Bioethics Committee holds that this particular research doesn't need to be reviewed by the Research Ethics Committee, as it has nothing to do with health issues or weak-will groups of people. Research ethics involved in oral history research are acknowledged and the project will be attuned with the European and local Cypriot legislation, human rights documents and professional codes. Consent forms will be signed by research participants. Also, as the project has to do with personal data of people, the Office of the Commissioner for Personal Data Protection has been notified for constitution and operation of archive, which includes the creation and process of archived data.