

Italian National Symposium on Oral Sources

By Salvatore Vento

In Genoa from 24th to 26th October 2007 the Italian National Symposium on Oral Sources took place, organized jointly by ANAI, ANAI Liguria, and the Ansaldo Foundation. The large number of participants and the high level of the debate underlined the need for a full discussion on a complex topic that involves a wide range of protagonists. The title (*Fonti orali: esperienze di conservazione, integrazione, trattamento* – Oral Sources: Experiences of Preservation, Integration, Treatment) foreshadowed a discussion that has grown out of experiences and reflections developed in the field. After the opening addresses of Luigi Giraldi and Alessandro Lombardo (respectively the new chair and the director of the Ansaldo Foundation) and Isabella Orefice (chair of ANAI) outlining the main goals of the symposium, the sessions developed around three main themes: the relationship between history and oral sources, the experiences and lastly, the projects.

Alessandro Portelli defined *oral sources* as “the use of the oral sources in historiography”, that is, oral testimonies of the protagonists of the researched events. He explained that they are informal individual narrations, usually part of a dialogue with an interlocutor. *Oral tradition*, in contrast, consists of formal narrations, shared and handed-down. The passage from “oral sources” to “oral history” takes place when they play a central role in historiographical work. The oral source is a relational source that is *created* in the presence of the historian: rather than *traced* through historical research. It is an art of listening and relating. The oral source is not a document of the past, but it an act of the present (telling, remembering); as a consequence, memory is a process that changes continuously. Even faulty memory is a source of interpretation. That’s why there is a history of events, a history of memory and a revision of the events through memory.

Giuseppe Paletta, starting from the observation that the origin of oral history is militant, posed a fundamental question: if a dialogue between two subjects is essential (interviewee/witness and researcher) in oral sources and, if empathy is possible only when there is a cultural (or political) affinity, how is it possible to interview people from diverse social classes (managers, entrepreneurs) where there is no affinity? Should we create another typology of researchers?

This question was answered by Augusta Molinari for whom oral history is a scientific subject matter with its own particular statute. Certainly every story is a story of its time period: however, the researcher who follows a precise model can relate with anybody. There are other problems, given that today’s orality is linked to the society of entertainment and the free use of memory; history is for public use expressed mostly through journalists, and with little participation from professional historians. The historian uses oral sources, creates a

source and, at the same time, critically analyses it. Oral history is a methodological process that does not seek confirmation, but only the representation of the events.

Luca Borzani concentrated on the relationship between past and future and among generations. If we have a perception of the future, we can reevaluate the past; therefore it follows that we have to start from the future in order to reconsider the past. During the collection of oral sources, it is necessary to think about their use. He pointed out the importance of also interviewing young people because there is a certain empathy-by-default for older generations, whereas that same empathy does not always exist for younger generations.

Antonella Mulè spoke about safeguarding oral sources that have been created for a research project; how to preserve them and how to use them. In this perspective, there is a need for cooperation between the researcher who produces the source and the archivist who preserves it. Things have changed since the previous conference held in 2001; nowadays we have to deal with a massive use of the Net. It has been at least 30 years since we first started to speak of oral sources as sound and audiovisual archival records. In 1972, the 7th Archives International Congress dedicated an entire section to audiovisual archives. From an archival point of view, the worthiness of a documentary source does not depend on the nature of its support, but on the process of creation of the sources itself. For this reason, the role of the source's producer and the context of production are so important.

Piero Cavallari, speaking about the history of the state records library, said that it is the first Italian public institution to systematically take care of oral sources. In 1962, Diego Carpitella (ethnomusicologist) and Antonio Magliaro (linguist) created the ethno-linguistic-musical archives – Aelm which preserves varied objects, from Edison's cylinder phonograph to the Magnetophon of the years following World War II. The source is created by the researcher within a research project, and should become accessible to the public only after the work of acquisition, filing and preservation has been carried out at an institutional level. The state records library is involved in the process of digitalization and it will soon become the Institute of Sound and Audiovisual Assets.

According to Roberta Tucci, oral sources, even if recorded on media that can be preserved, safeguarded and archived, are intangible in their contents and can be considered as "archival goods" and "intangible cultural assets". In the first case, safeguarding of oral sources for the future regards the physical preservation of their media; in the second case, it concerns knowledge of a cultural heritage and the valorization of a territory. The Lazio Region promoted the creation of a Bdi ("intangible demographic ethno-anthropological asset") schedule. Once the pioneering work is finished, we need to move on to the most systematic stage of seeking out, collecting and surveying of (Italy's) varied cultural heritage and its social actors.

Renata Meazza, presenting the situation of the Lombardy Region, explained that audio, video, iconographic and paper records preserved, filed and digitalized (and put online) are the result of field surveys and constitute a large part of the traditional cultural manifestations of the regional territory. At present, there is close cooperation with the ISEC Foundation (Institute for the contemporary history) to digitalize and to file oral history materials: this includes work and business history, as well as the social and political history of Milan and its surrounding territory. Since 2002, a field research project (with audiovisual supports) has been launched on places of tradition and of labor.

Sergio Cardarelli talked about the recent experience of the Bank of Italy, who created an oral sources archives called "project oral history" conceived by a working group that was set up for the purpose. This project is part of the multimedia section of the Historical Archives

(ASBI), an extensive archives. Up to now, five audio interviews with leading figures of the Bank of Italy have been produced.

Michele Trentini (Archivio provinciale per la tradizione orale presso il museo degli usi e costumi della gente trentina di San Michele all'Adige – “Provincial archives for the oral tradition at the museum of customs and traditions of Trentino people in San Michele all'Adige”) outlined the variety of different materials that an archives can preserve on multimedia supports: chants and music, traditional legends, audiovisual records on manufacturing and rural techniques, biographic interviews, ethnographic records.

Micaela Procaccia illustrated the cooperation between the Archives General Management and the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation in Los Angeles (now University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Institute) which made it possible to acquire 434 interviews in Italian now preserved at the Central State Archives. In the two largest centers of preservation of audiovisual material in Italy (Istituto Luce and Rai) a considerable portion of the material (about 37%) censused in 1993 was made up of “life stories” (narrated by Holocaust survivors). The Archives General Management acquired the indexation software of the Shoah Foundation and entered into an agreement with the computer center of the Scuola normale superiore in Pisa for the reapplication of the software and its adaptation to the Italian interviews.

Giuliana Bertacchi, recalling the conference of 1982 concerning the use of oral sourcing in the teaching of contemporary history, reviewed several widely accepted concepts: the oral source must be created, since it does not pre-exist; the witness is the protagonist and the producer of the source; the presence of intersubjectivity (interviewee and researcher sharing the same subject); the existence of a double context (the historical event recalled and the social scene of the present). From a teaching point of view, the oral source is the preferable way to approach the themes of subjectivity and memory as dynamic mechanisms when considering the relationship between individual stories of a period or event and so-called “Big History”. Oral sources offer numerous possibilities for weaving multidisciplinary themes, and it fosters the acquisition of essential data for historiographic training: each creation is a conscious production of historical memory at diverse levels.

Paola Caroli, during the session of the conference which took place at the State Archives in Genoa, elaborated on the growing commitment towards oral sources and recalled her own youthful passion when she listened to her relatives' stories.

Finally, the writer of this article presented the initiative of the Ansaldo Foundation “La Liguria del saper fare si racconta” started in July 2006, thanks to the financial support of the Compagnia di San Paolo. We opened a well-equipped room for the consultation of collected material. Up to now we have recorded 60 interviews with workers, employees and managers representing the productive sectors of the four provinces of the region. These are stories of working life videotaped on mini DV cassettes and then transferred on DVDs to facilitate consultation. In the same archives of the oral sources, there are also interviews recorded during the research activity. Moreover, we have developed collaborative efforts with other initiatives, aiming at collecting the material, both sound and video.