




Andrzej Hoja

[Museum of Gdańsk]

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8952-4858>

Regional and city oral archives as places inspiring changes in cultural memory - the example of the Gdańsk Oral History Archive

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On several occasions in the 20th century, the city of Gdańsk has been the backdrop of events that became a part of both local and broader Polish cultural memory, that is a certain canon of knowledge about the past included among others in school curricula and the calendar of annual celebrations and commemorative events.¹ Among these we could list the conflict concerning the city's nationality after the First World War and the establishment of the Free City of Gdańsk, the start of the Second World War with the attack on Westerplatte, the events of December 1970, the anti-communist movement, the strikes of 1980 in the Gdańsk shipyard and the subsequent foundation of the Independent Self-Governing Trade Union 'Solidarity' (nszz 'Solidarność'), the martial law, or the mass internment of Gdańsk opposition activists. Institutional and community oral archives existing in the city since the first decade of the 21st century would collect recordings of accounts by residents of Gdańsk who had been associated with these events in some way. Such recordings make up a large part of the archival collections of the Institute of National Remembrance,² the European Solidarity Centre³ and the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk.⁴ Individuals recorded by the first two institutions are predominantly people associated with political opposition during the Polish People's Republic. When it comes to the Museum of the Second World War, the accounts are from those who remembered the experience of the war. Archives profiled in this manner were also more likely to gather topic-oriented stories rather than life stories.

At the turn of the first and the second decade of the 21st century, the above mentioned initiatives were joined by the activity of non-governmental organisations. This activity, too, was related to the spaces and events ingrained in Polish cultural memory. Accounts by women recorded as part of the Stowarzyszenie Arteria's (Arteria Association) project titled *Stocznia jest kobietą. Opowieści kobiet ze Stoczni Gdańskiej* (The Shipyard is a Woman. Stories of the Women of the Gdańsk Shipyard) were intended to use oral history to give voice to groups that had been thus far excluded from the narrative. In this case, the perspective recorded was the perspective of the women workers of the Gdańsk Shipyard, who talked about

1 J. Assmann, *Pamięć kulturowa. Pismo, zapamiętywanie i polityczna tożsamość w cywilizacjach starożytnych*, Warszawa 2008, pp. 66–71; A. Assmann, *1988 – między historią a pamięcią*, in M. Saryusz-Wolska (ed.), *Pamięć zbiorowa i kulturowa. Współczesna perspektywa niemiecka*, Kraków 2009, pp. 170–173.

2 <https://opowiedziane.ipn.gov.pl/ahm/o-projekcie/> (accessed: 30.04.2023).

3 At the time this article was being prepared, no description of the oral history collection was available on the institution's website; B. Kosk, K. Knoch, 'W stronę demokracji i wolności. I Krajowy Zjazd Delegatów nszz 'Solidarność' we wspomnieniach Aleksandra Halla i Anny Marii Mydlarskiej,' *Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej*, vol. 11, 2021, p. 162, note no. 5.

4 <https://historiamowiona.muzeum1939.pl/o-portalu> (accessed: 30.04.2023).

the Shipyard as their place of employment but also as the birthplace of 'Solidarity,' which made it an internationally recognised site.⁵

Similarly, recordings made around the same time by the Oddział Pomorski Towarzystwa Przyjaciół Wilna i Ziemi Wileńskiej (Pomeranian Branch of the Friends of Vilnius and the Wilno Land Society), deposited in the Cyfrowe Archiwum Pomorskich Kresowiaków (Digital Archive of the Pomeranian People from the Western Borderlands), consisted of themed interviews conducted with people who came to Pomerania from Vilnius and the Vilnius region. The issue of interest at the time was the forced relocation and the circumstances of these people's transport to Pomerania, and occasionally the interviews were expanded to include their experience before the relocation as well as stories about their life after their arrival.⁶

As part of community-driven activity, testimonies and accounts (mostly topic-oriented) have been and are still recorded by non-governmental organisations in various parts of Gdańsk. This activity, however, is oriented towards a particular result, which is the publication of the recordings in part or in full, whereas archiving and editing or sharing the entirety of materials collected does not always happen.⁷ It is worth noting that, while oral history recording collections developed by non-governmental organisations contain mostly recordings of the residents of Gdańsk, in the case of the previously mentioned institutions (Institute of National Remembrance, European Solidarity Centre, Museum of the Second World War) the accounts of the people of Gdańsk only make up a small part of their collections, which feature materials from all across Poland, and even from abroad.

In summary, in the first two decades of the 21st century, oral history recordings of the people from Gdańsk made by state and local government institutions were focused on breakthrough supraregional events and themes, and the interviewees were individuals who had contributed in a significant way to such events, often as leaders or direct witnesses. Thanks to these recordings, the view of the events they talk about undoubtedly became more multidimensional and included multiple perspectives. Nevertheless, analysing these collections, one might get the impression that these projects only reflect a very narrow group of narrators. This approach largely focuses on the 'grand' history, leaving out everyone and anyone who falls

5 A. Miler, 'Nawet nie wiedziałaś, jaką historię w sobie nosisz.' *Stocznia Gdańska i odkrywanie jej historii*, 'Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej', vol. 11, 2021, p. 290; B. Borowiak (ed.), *Stocznia kobiet*, Gdańsk 2016, pp. 13–18.

6 Full interviews and their transcripts have been published on the project's website: <http://www.capk.pl/> (accessed: 30.04.2023).

7 Documentation initiatives by the Stowarzyszenia Biskupia Górka (Biskupia Górka Association) are worth mentioning: <https://biskupiagorka.pl/archiwum/> (accessed: 30.04.2023) as well as the activity of the Fundacja Wspólnota Gdańska (Gdańsk Community Foundation) such as their project *Skarby Oliwian* (The Treasures of the People of Oliwa): <https://vivaoliva.pl/skarby-oliwian-projekt> (accessed: 30.04.2023).

outside of it. Documentation initiatives of local societies and organisations complete this picture and fill in certain gaps with different categories of narrators; still, their activity is focused around small communities limited to particular areas of the city, and the gathered materials are not always widely available.

This situation was what prompted the foundation of the Gdańsk Oral History Archive, which was established in 2018 as a part of the Museum of Gdańsk. Its task was to record biographical accounts of the residents of Gdańsk or individuals in some way related to the city; those who were born here, those who left at a certain point in their lives, and those who settled here over the years. In other words, the common denominator was Gdańsk, and not the participation in particular historical events or living in a particular part of the city. What is important, from the very beginning, the accounts have been accessible in full in the Museum and the finding aids have been parallelly produced. The biographical nature of the accounts has shown the specific character of the Gdańsk population as well as the distinct groups it consists of, and the ongoing recording model allowed for a wide variety of narrators.

The ongoing recording model is only one of the methods of growing the archival collection, which, by the second half of 2023, housed nearly 200 predominantly biographical recordings. A large portion of the collection are recordings made as part of thematic projects. Two of them were carried out even before the archive was officially established. In 2016, as part of a collaboration, the Museum of Gdańsk (at the time: the Historical Museum of the City of Gdańsk) obtained copies of recordings made for a project organised by the KARTA Center Foundation in Warsaw titled *Wspólne pół wieku. Kontynuacja dokumentacji pamięci lokalnej w polsko-niemieckich narracjach* (Half a Century Together. Continued Documentation of Local Memory in Polish-German Narratives).⁸ A year later, the Museum of Gdańsk launched its own oral history project, *Miasto z gruzów. Odbudowa Gdańska oczami świadków* (A City From Rubbles. Rebuilding Gdańsk Through the Eyes of Witnesses), which included recordings of those who were involved in the process of physical and social rebuilding of the city.⁹ Another series of recordings were made in 2018 as part of the project *Kościół obywatelski. Budowa gdańskich świątyń w okresie Polski ludowej* (The Citizens' Church. The Construction of Temples in Gdańsk During the Polish People's Republic).¹⁰ Like in the previous projects, biographical recordings documented the process of members of different

8 The project received a subsidy from the Foundation for Polish-German Cooperation: <https://fwpn.org.pl/assets/Publikacje/Sprawozdania/2016/ListaPL2016.pdf> (accessed: 15.05.2023).

9 <https://muzeumgdansk.pl/o-muzeum-gdanska/fundusze-krajowe/miasto-z-gruzow-odbudowa-gdanska-oczami-swiatek/> (accessed: 15.05.2023).

10 <https://muzeumgdansk.pl/o-muzeum-gdanska/fundusze-krajowe/kosciol-obywatelski-budowa-gdanskich-swiatek-w-okresie-polski-ludowej/> (accessed: 15.05.2023).

social groups becoming involved in the construction of churches in Gdańsk during the Polish People's Republic period. The most recent collection of recordings made as part of a project focused on a particular topic is a series of accounts by architects and urban planners recorded between 2021 and 2023 as a result of a collaborative project titled *The Oral History of Polish Architecture* initiated by the National Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning, in which the accounts were archived simultaneously at the KARTA Center Foundation and the History Meeting House in Warsaw.¹¹

In 2020, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Museum of Gdańsk, the Pomeranian Branch of the Friends of Vilnius and the Wilno Land Society committed to depositing copies of recordings from the previously mentioned the Cyfrowe Archiwum Pomorskich Kresowiaków (Digital Archive of the Pomeranian People from the Western Borderlands) at the Gdańsk Oral History Archive. A year later, the Gdańsk Archive selected a collection of eighty recordings focused primarily on the migration of the people from the former Wilno Land to Gdańsk and more generally to Pomerania. The recordings were made between 2009 and 2015 as part of several projects and ongoing activity. This was an important example of a non-governmental organisation sharing a copy of their recordings, aware of the fact that depositing a copy of their collection in a cultural institution whose continuous functioning is guaranteed by the local government ensures a greater chance of it surviving for the future generations. The general issue of oral history recording collections in the possession of associations and foundations, the future of which is tied to their ongoing existence, remains unresolved. The Gdańsk Oral History Archive has always viewed its mission as extending beyond establishing its own collection, seeing it as including support for organisations in Gdańsk which record interviews, ensuring the opportunity to share the recordings made as a result of collaboration (as well as deposit resources in the Archive, which means securing them in the digital collection of the Museum of Gdańsk). The result of this activity was establishing cooperation with local city district organisations and activists, which would facilitate access to individuals who wanted to share their life stories. In such cases, recordings would be deposited both at the local district organisation and at the Gdańsk Oral History Archive.

Does the collection of the Gdańsk Oral History Archive have a specific character? It certainly represents the Gdańsk community from the first two decades of the 21st century. It reflects, to an extent, the origins of the senior generation of inhabitants of the post-war Gdańsk, who were largely migrants or their children who had come both from the neighbouring regions of the Eastern Pomerania, chiefly Kashubia, as well as from the Greater and Central Poland and the Eastern Borderlands – the Vilnius area and the provinces of Southeast Poland.

11 <https://niaiu.pl/dzialalnosc/historie-mowione-polskiej-architektury/> (accessed: 15.05.2023).

An important group of interviewees are individuals born in Gdańsk before the start of the Second World War, who, without changing their place of residence, started out in the Free City of Gdańsk, then during the war lived in the Third Reich, to then become Polish citizens. This group includes Poles, Kashubians and Germans (though German-language interviews are being made in Gdańsk, primarily they are recorded in Germany, where thousands of former citizens of Gdańsk found their home after 1945). An interesting research area in this respect are the relations between residents whose families found themselves on both sides of the border, in Poland and in Germany, after the Second World War ended.

We have recently gotten used to the fact that oral history has incredible potential when it comes to participation projects in museums¹² and is used more and more in historical (and other) exhibitions, gradually becoming nearly an obligatory element.¹³ It serves as an additional, supplementary element; a way of giving the voice to the participants of the events, enabling emotions and personal perspective to be heard. This potential, however, is much greater. Oral history archives can also (or, perhaps, primarily) have a potential to inspire. This is what happened in the Museum of Gdańsk, where the collection of the Gdańsk Oral History Archive became the main inspiration for the organisation and the form of the exhibition titled “*Wolę o tym nie mówić.*” *Tożsamość gdańszczan a powojenna rzeczywistość* (“I’d Rather Not Talk About It.” The Identity of Gdańsk Inhabitants and the Post-War Reality).¹⁴

The exhibit was a story talking about the experience of the inhabitants of Gdańsk who remained in the city after the Second World War. Up until 1945, Gdańsk was culturally a predominantly German city; it was inhabited mostly by Germans, but also by Slavs from Western Pomerania, who, settling in the city in large numbers since the 19th century, would quickly assimilate into the dominant German culture. During the 1920s and 1930s, when the city, together with its surrounding area, was the Free City of Gdańsk, an overwhelming majority of its residents felt German, however Poles and Pomeranians of various national identities were present as well. After the war ended, in line with the arrangements

12 M. Kopiniak, *Historia mówiona jako narzędzie partycypacji muzealnej*, ‘Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej,’ vol. 11, 2021, p. 110.

13 In fact, it would be difficult to find a historical exhibit concerning the 20th century that would not offer fragments of recordings of accounts by individuals sharing their experience related to the topic of the exhibition. Cf. in the Polish context, e.g. main exhibitions of the Warsaw Uprising Museum, the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, the Dialogue Centre Upheavals (branch of the National Museum in Szczecin), the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, Oskar Schindler’s Enamel Factory (a branch of the Historical Museum of the City of Kraków), the Memorial Museum Siberia or the Praga Museum of Warsaw (branch of the Museum of Warsaw).

14 The exhibition of the Museum of Gdańsk was available in the Main City Hall between 02.09.2022 and 07.05.2023, and it was curated by Mateusz Jasik, Anna Czarnota, Andrzej Hoja and Magdalena Jaszczka.

from Potsdam, Germans were to leave the land that was given back to Poland. In order to be granted Polish citizenship and be allowed to stay, one had to prove their Polish nationality. Those who followed this official procedure, along with those who did not, but who remained in the city anyway, were about to confront the newcomers, who came to Gdańsk in increasing numbers, now not only from the neighbouring areas, but also from the distant Central Poland or the former Eastern Borderlands of the Second Polish Republic. It was this confrontation of the people of Gdańsk who remained in the city with the new settlers that became the source of often painful experiences, and later a taboo, even among family members. The exhibition was to, in a way, break down this taboo. Nearly 80 years after the events, it showed the difficult reality of the new neighbourhood in the initial period of the post-war Polish history of Gdańsk. For the first time in the form of a museum exhibit and adopting a microhistory approach, it brought the local visitors and tourists closer to stories they had likely never heard before.

The nearly twenty biographical account recordings deposited in the archive enabled distinguishing recurring phenomena and problems faced by the exhibition's protagonists in the first years after the war. This subject was typically more or less avoided among families, and information on it was not often passed down to younger generations. In summary, these problems included issues with the Polish language, changing first and last names to more 'Polish-sounding' ones, post-war repressions in the form of forced labour, confiscating property and transferring people to concentration camps for Germans as a stage in their relocation West, the motivations for staying in the city or leaving it, family members' service in the German army, or the abuse (including sexual assault) suffered at the hands of the Red Army, and its aftermath.

One could expect that, since these topics were often avoided at home (hence the title of the exhibition), they would not come up in interviews. This turned out to be untrue. The problems were articulated, sometimes they would surface as responses to follow-up questions, and sometimes, although they were not directly discussed, through interpretation of the entire account, inferences could be drawn about experiences that would remain a family secret.

Among the phenomena which would almost always come up in life accounts of both those who remained in Gdańsk and those who left later on is the wave of violence that flooded the city with the arrival of the Soviet army. What is interesting is the way this issue tended to be presented; the victims of this violence were typically loved ones, friends, or unknown third parties, and almost never the interviewees themselves, particularly not female interviewees.¹⁵ The exhibition presented the experience of the people of Gdańsk after 1945 in several different

15 J. Ostrowska, 'Lepiej nie mówić.' *Milczenie ofiar gwałtów wojennych z okresu drugiej wojny światowej w relacjach świadków*, 'Narracje o zagładzie,' vol. 1, 2021, pp. 36–39.

ways: there were artifacts, memorabilia as well as art – art interventions¹⁶ and playable recordings of short fragments of life accounts. As regards the issue of violence, accounts of women were purposefully not presented. The creators of the exhibition decided to include accounts of rapes by Russians from the perspective of a witness who, in the March of 1945, was hiding together with other residents in the basement of the building they lived in:

Several of these army men entered the shelter, too. When they found nothing, they took out two young German women. They took Ms. Müller, this teacher, and they also took one more German girl, the daughter of the Regendanz man, Marianna, who was, I don't know how old she could have been, but she wasn't this, so to speak, but she was old enough. They took them away, these women. After a while they came back to the shelter. Their clothes were of course torn, their hair in disarray, they were crying, sobbing, they were thrown into the shelter to us. Certainly the German women, the remaining ones, took them to the back, to a different room. And they took care of them there. But I could still hear the groans, the crying... and the other women comforted them. I did not know what happened to them, it wasn't known, but it was obvious what they were taken away for, which was only later, in the later years, when I was an older boy, and while listening to the stories of my family, grandma, aunt, in these memories they confirmed it, because they said these women were taken to be raped upstairs, in the flats. That's where they were dragged and that's where they were raped.¹⁷

Memories from school also emerge in accounts as significant and meaningful. The issue of relations with newcomers from other parts of Poland, however, are often only discussed in response to a follow-up question. When responding, those who, in the years following 1945, did not speak Polish or only spoke very little Polish (during the war, in Gdańsk as well as other territories annexed by the Third Reich, communicating in Polish had been prohibited) would predominantly share the experience of conflicts, bullying and violence from their peers:

After the war, it was also a terrible time and there were repressions. And then, you know, a child that hadn't been using their mother tongue for 5 years... I would understand everything, only I would butcher the language as I spoke... Well, you know, over all these years, an adult would forget, let alone a child. So, they mocked me, made fun of me. And my classmate didn't want to sit with 'a German pig,' so she hit me, and I hit her back. And so a fight erupted in the classroom. Two girls tearing at each other, and the teacher comes in, Mr. Kilianek. A very good, proper teacher. Really was.

16 Art interventions were the work of Zuzanna Dolega, an artist from the Gdańsk-Gdynia-Sopot Tri-City.

17 GAHM, sig. GAHM_0007_A, Interview with Jan Małgorzewicz, 25 November 2016, 24 May 2017, Gdańsk (recorded by A. Hoja).

“What’s going on in here?”

And we could not hear or see him, you know... He separated us, and after class, he said:

“Please stay now, we’ll talk.”

So what was this about? And I said:

“I’m not a German pig. The entire war I was a Polish pig. The pig stayed. Only the nationality changed, I didn’t want that.”

And Mr. Kilianek says:

“And where are you from?”

And she responds – and she had that Russian, Eastern accent:

“You’re from the East? Alright. But your classmate did not call you names!”

“Well of course! I am Polish.”

“And I am not?”¹⁸

In some instances, like in the example above, the accounts mention the teacher, who was supposed to bring the class together, prevent violence and mediate between the pupils. A different example shows the decisions of teachers which might have influenced the course of education, in particular the lengthening of the education period:

At home, back in those years, we would speak Polish. But during the occupation and after everything we’ve been through, everything that happened, unfortunately we would speak German. In 1945, we had to quickly switch back to Polish, but the accent would give us away. It was not that good, and we had bad grammar. So, when we were put in a class with newcomers from other parts of Poland, there were differences.

But I had a wonderful teacher, class teacher, who would always stress: “None of you speak correctly, each of you has an accent.” And those who were from the Vilnius area and different other regions, from villages, some of them had never attended school before, they had the same problems. This is why we got along sort of quickly. But that first period was very difficult. Pupils who were older than me, and my sister and brother were assigned to a class, they called it ‘germanised.’ They had bigger problems with the language and had to learn it. Breaks were at different times, and they were leaving school at different times, too, because they would assault each other; these kids were called Germans, they were beaten, they had bricks and fence boards thrown at them. My sister would often be the victim, too.

I was not assigned to a class like this. I was a bit younger. Because of this, I was a bit behind. Instead of the fourth or third grade, I was put in the second grade of primary school. There was a moment when I asked the teacher if I could skip a year. She convinced me not to, because they

18 GAHM, sig. GAHM_0045_A, Interview with Wanda Ewertowska, 23 March 2019, 22 June 2019, Gdańsk (recorded by A. Hoja).

would eat me alive. That it was better for me to slowly but surely... and to stay with these girls I already knew in this class.¹⁹

The subject of adopting Polish-sounding names, although it affected almost all of the interviewees' families, would emerge only in mentions in the recordings, and predominantly as an answer to additional questions. Although this issue concerned one of the basic indicators of identity, it did not carry such weight in the accounts. This might be the result of various factors – the name being changed early in childhood (before puberty and the formation of the sense of identity), the double naming standards (for instance, the original, old name being used at home, and the new official one – only in the public/official context), or returning to the previous name later on.

In [19]49 I enrol for school No. 35, and they tell me that well yes, but if my name is Manfred, I better go to Germany. And people [like that] cannot be accepted. Alright. And now, it turns out my middle name is Joachim... And there was Joachim Lelewel. I'm talking about this, because my brother changed his to Bogdan, my sister changed hers [too]... I attended primary school as Joachim. I went through and graduated primary school as Joachim, only in [19]56... and I am not sure why, but I think people were smarter, I started secondary school, Secondary School of Fine Arts No. 1 in Orłowo, and there, I was admitted as Manfred.²⁰

The subject of serving in German military appears in recordings most frequently as a natural thing, especially when a death of a family member on the war front is discussed,²¹ and in other cases it is entirely left out. This topic becoming a taboo is related to the private and public situation of these families after the war, as any memorabilia associated with this experience were being destroyed, photos with uniformed soldiers were being retouched, and any related information was being erased from biographies. Although this experience was shared by so many inhabitants of the Eastern Pomerania, it was not seen as an act of enforcement and repression among the newcomers, particularly those from Central and Eastern Poland. This perception was often caused by the experience of violence committed by German soldiers, which was still fresh in the memories

19 GAHM, sig. GAHM_0033_V, Interview with Christiana Herbasch, 18 September 2018, Gdańsk (recorded by A. Hoja, O. Blumczyńska, B. Ostrowska; prepared by A. Hoja).

20 GAHM, sig. GAHM_0045_A, Interview with Manfred Białek, 25 September, 2 October 2020, Gdańsk (recorded by A. Hoja).

21 An illustrative example of this was during a meeting with a female interviewee, who was to lend us some items for the exhibition. As she discussed the lives of the families of people in a photograph she knew, she mentioned that their fathers were also drafted into the military during the war. To make sure, I asked her if she meant the German military, to which she responded that "naturally so," explaining that she did not know anyone in the area whose father would serve in a different military.

of the new settlers. Out of fear of being misunderstood, families would not discuss their members' service in Wehrmacht at all, the course of the service would remain unknown (unless written correspondence survived) or take the form of a family legend.

The exhibition on the Museum of Gdańsk titled "*Wolę o tym nie mówić.*" *Tożsamość gdańszczyzan a powojenna rzeczywistość* ("I'd Rather Not Talk About It." The Identity of Gdańsk Inhabitants and the Post-War Reality) inspired by the accounts from the Gdańsk Oral History Archive, paradoxically speaks about the issue of not talking. It is also an attempt at telling the story of remembering or forgetting the particularly difficult experience of the first post-war years in Gdańsk. Practically none of the problems of the people of Gdańsk that are discussed by the exhibition have become a part of the city's cultural memory. This is not because the problem was small-scale, considering that much of this experience was identical for other inhabitants of the Eastern Pomerania who started settling in Gdańsk after 1945. The reason for this lies rather in the strong predominant centrally-controlled state narrative about the past which only changed slightly after 1989. The local cultural memory was formed based on strong post-war influence of the immigrants from Central Poland and the Eastern Borderlands. It thwarted the voice of the native residents and inhabitants of Pomerania, the often silent and traumatised depositaries of the experiences shown in the exhibition.

The exhibition sparked considerable interest among the people of Gdańsk – those who found similar experiences in the histories of their families as well as those who empathised with them, discovering the individual personal stories of their fellow residents. Many Gdańsk natives visited the exhibition looking for answers concerning their own identity and to fill in the gaps in their family stories that resulted from the silence of the previous generations.

In conclusion, city and regional oral history archives, as shown on the example of the Gdańsk Oral History Archive, as depositaries of local memory and experience, have the potential of changing their still considerably popular documentation approach consisting in predominantly interviewing the elites or participants of events from the national, regional or local cultural memory. This is not only a way of going back to the essence of oral history as the voice of those at the bottom, previously unheard; as the stories of groups thus far excluded from the official discourse, but also a way of building a database which might serve as the foundation for a new, official story of a place, this time including the voices of the previously silent ones.