

The Challenge of Multiple Identities. Multiethnicity in Genealogy, Local History and Regional Memory—Challenges and Opportunities for Libraries and Other Memory Institutions

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Oral History Method: An Affective Tool in Researching Local History

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Abstract:

Today, oral history method is used not only by historians, political and social scientists but also by librarians. It serves as a very effective tool in researching local history and contributing to regional memory. In 2015, Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania in partnership with “Global Lithuanian Leaders,” Antanas Smetona High School of Ukmergė 4 and Vladas Slaitas Public Library of Ukmergė District Municipality launched a pilot educational youth project “Conversations about (E)migration.” The main aim of the project was to introduce high school students to the history of Lithuanian emigration and its current trends. Students were asked to interview people who emigrated from their district or recently returned from emigration. Oral interviews, consisting of audio files and transcribed texts, were deposited in the local library. The project was very successful. This year, National Library of Lithuania expanded project’s geography and implemented it in five high schools of Utena County. The county is one of the leading counties in emigration.

The paper describes the project “Conversations about (E)migration” and discusses at length the application and value of oral history method.

Keywords: oral history, emigration, youth education, local history.

In 2015, Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania (hereinafter—National Library of Lithuania) decided to implement a pilot educational youth project, “Conversations about (E)migration.” This was National Library of Lithuania, active and responsible partner of the society, response to emigration crisis in Lithuania.

The statistics show that during the last 27 years since Lithuania's independence, one-third of its population has emigrated. Every second Lithuanian emigrant is 20-29 years old. The countryside has been affected the most by the recent wave of emigration. Even to this day, Lithuania's government and society see emigration only as a problem and not a crisis.

The main goals of the project were to engage young Lithuanians with the history of the Lithuanian diaspora, to foster conscious choices about going or staying, and to tell

emigrants' stories. National Library of Lithuania invited Antanas Smetona High School of Ukmergė and Vladas Šlaitas Public Library of Ukmergė District Municipality to participate in the project. Another project partner was NGO Global Lithuanian Leaders, the network of global Lithuanian professionals around the world.

The project, aimed at high school students, offered a variety of activities throughout the academic year. Students participated in interactive lectures about Lithuanian diaspora and its long and rich history. They attended oral history workshop, met with emigrants and listened to their stories. Students were asked to interview an emigrant using a questionnaire designed for this particular project and finally, debate issues regarding emigration. In the middle of the project, students visited National Library of Lithuania, where they were shown the documentary heritage of Lithuanian diaspora from all over the world.

Before the implementation of the project, students' responses about current emigration in Lithuania were: I don't care; everybody emigrates; and/or I don't know why, but I want to emigrate. At the end of the project they: had their own opinion about emigration, better understood the experience of an (e)migrant; some of them chose to study and live in Lithuania. According to the principal of Antanas Smetona High School of Ukmergė, Adolfas Girdžiūna, the biggest impact of the project could be seen at the end of the school year. He noted that none of school's graduates chose to study abroad and live in emigration.

Oral History Method

Seeking to introduce high school students to current Lithuanian emigration, its affects and causes, authors of the project decided to employ oral history method. This method, used almost explicitly by Lithuanian ethnographers and anthropologists, is rarely employed in the work with high school students.

There are a few oral history definitions. One of them says that oral history is the collection and study of historical information about individuals, families, important events, or everyday life using audio, video, or transcriptions of planned interviews. Oral history is a systematic collection of living testimonies. Participants of the project “Conversations about (E)migration” were asked to interview an emigrant currently living outside Lithuania or a person who recently returned from emigration.

Before conducting interviews, project participants took part in oral history workshop led by the representative of National Library of Lithuania. They were introduced to eight oral history project steps, which are: (1) Identify and describe the main topic of the project; (2) Make the plan of implementation; (3) Be well informed on the main topic of the project; (4) Conduct an interview; (5) Transcribe an interview; (6) Analyze and assess the information collected during the interview; (7) Summarize and present results of the project; and (8) Deposit all project material to the archives.

Before the implementation of oral history project about emigration, students were encouraged to know the answers to six basic questions: who, what, when, where, why and how, the most important of them being why. An interviewer must know and be able to explain to an interviewee why and how the project will be implemented and where the collected material will be stored. An interviewer must be aware of the rights of both, interviewee and interviewer, to the project, e.g., copyright, compensation, future use of the material, its publicity and/or its storage. An interviewee has to be informed that s/he will be

asked to sign a release form that allows to use his/her narrative for research or other purposes. The interview will be kept confidential and not made public until an interviewee signs a written permission to use it. An interviewer cannot promise things which s/he will likely not be able to fulfill, such as depositing gathered material in the archives. S/he must respect interviewee's right to refuse to speak about certain topics, prohibit or restrict access to his/her memories or, in exceptional cases, remain anonymous.

Students were also taught how to conduct an interview. A successful interview can be compared to a friendly conversation while drinking a cup of tea or coffee. In other words, two things have to be present in a successful interview: it has to be a conversation and take place in comfortable and friendly environment. An oral history interview is a conversation between two people. It should remain such from the beginning to the end of the meeting.

In successful interview, a suitable interviewer and a suitable interviewee are equally important. A good interviewer is first off all a good and active listener. A good interviewer leads and does not direct conversation. S/he is well prepared for the interview and has a questionnaire ready at hand. Good interviewer does not rush conversation. A suitable interviewee is a person who trusts an interviewer and the project itself. Also, a suitable interviewee is not always the person pointed to an interviewer by other people.

During oral history workshop, students learned how to ask questions. They were encouraged to keep questions at hand, but try not to read them during the interview itself. If an interviewer forgets to ask a question, s/he can do it at the end of the conversation. It is advisable that an interviewer does not approach questions immediately, but allows the conversation to "warm up." Therefore, at first s/he is encouraged to ask simple questions, such as biographical data of an interviewee. Personal or more sensitive and complex questions have to be asked later on. An interviewer must ask one question at a time using simple language. If an interviewee is older, one has to speak clearly and slowly. Do not be afraid of longer pauses and silences. Learn to wait. Show that you listen carefully using your body language. If the answer is unclear, do not be afraid to ask for clarification. If an interviewee did not answer the question or did not answer fully, pose the question again. Do not argue with an interviewee. Listen carefully to conversation and remember where it was interrupted or deviated from the topic. Try to conduct interview within two hours.

Since interviews of the project "Conversations about (E)migration" were recorded, students were encouraged to get familiar with and check their recording equipment prior to the real interview. The interview has to be conducted in a quiet place with as less disturbances and interruptions as possible. The record has to be clear and clean so that others would be able to listen and understand it.

At the end of the interview, an interviewer has to pose two questions. A question to oneself: Are there any questions from the questionnaire that transgressed or were not discussed during the interview? A question to an interviewee: Are there any questions you would like to return to and discuss at length?

After the interview, an interviewer and an interviewee are encouraged to exchange their contact information, in case any of the parties has any further questions. Before or after the interview, an interviewer has to fill out a short form with information about an interviewee, e.g., first and last name, date of birth, and etc. (See Annex No. 1)

All oral history interviews are confidential until people who are interviewed sign a written form “Oral Interview Release Form,” which states under what circumstances and for what purpose(s) interviews can be used in the future. (See Annex No. 2)

When transcribing their oral history project interviews, students were advised to follow as close the original interview as they could. They were encouraged to indicate interviewee's reaction or emotion during the interview using brackets, e.g., [laughs], [pauses], and so on. If the sentence feels too long, do not try to break it down into smaller segments. If during the interview, an interviewer forgot to acquire the necessary additional material (such as “Release Form” or “Interviewee's Personal Data”) s/he has to contact an interviewee again.

The second part of oral history workshop was dedicated to creating a questionnaire. Students were divided into smaller groups and asked to come up with several questions for each section: Emigrating; Living in Emigration; and Future Plans. The final questionnaire which students were using to interview their interviewees during the project was created using their proposed questions. (See Annex No. 3)

Conversations about (E)migration-2

After successful pilot project, National Library of Lithuania expanded project's geography. In academic year of 2016-2017, the institution implemented its second project “Conversations about (E)migration-2” in Utena County. The county was not chosen by accident. It is one of the leading counties in emigration. The participants of the second project were students of five Utena County high schools: Jonas Biliūnas High School of Anykščiai, Molėtai High School, Dainiškis High School of Utena, “Ažuolas” High School of Zarasai, and Ignalina High School. The final event, debate “Emigration—A Necessity?,” was held at National Library of Lithuania on May 17, 2017, in which almost 100 high school students discussed pros and cons of emigration and its impact on Lithuania.

Next academic year, National Library of Lithuania will implement its project in the western part of Lithuania, Tauragė County, which also greatly suffers from people leaving to live abroad.

Oral history method proved to be a very affective and successful tool in implementing and carrying project “Conversations about (E)migration.” Students received new useful information and—most importantly—had firsthand experience about emigration. The lectures introduced students to emigration from the historic point of view, whereas, the interviews which students conducted with emigrants exposed them to current tendencies of emigration and personal stories of people who chose to leave their homeland and start a new life in a foreign country.

High school teachers who participated in the project noted that oral history method could be employed much broader, e.g., in helping students to study native and foreign languages, geography, history, and other subjects. It could be also used in high school art and research projects. A teacher from Molėtai High School shared an idea to employ oral history method in collecting information about school's alumni. Project participants, including librarians, see many more opportunities of employing this method in their work with youth and older people.

Annex No. 1

Conversations about (E)migration

Interviewee's Personal Data / Interview's Data

Name:

Address:

Phone number:

E-mail:

Other participants in the conversation:

Date of birth:

Place of birth:

Education:

Professional experience:

Additional info:

Data collected by:

Interviewer's name:

Transcribed by:

Length of interview:

Date of interview:

Annex No. 2

Oral Interview Release Form

I _____ understand that the interview conducted on _____
by _____ was recorded. I hereby give the educational project “Conversations about (E)migration” and persons acting on behalf of the project permission to use all or any part of these recordings for such scholarly and educational purposes as project's implementators or persons acting on behalf of it shall determine are appropriate.

Signature _____

Name _____

Address _____

Annex No. 3

Conversations about (E)migration

Questionnaire

I. Emigrating:

When did you emigrate?

Where did you emigrate from?

Which country and city did you emigrate to?

Why did you choose exactly that place?

Did you know somebody in the new place? Who?

Did you emigrate alone or with your family? If with the family, how many members emigrated with you?

If you emigrated alone, did you have plans to invite your family to join you later?

Why did you decide to emigrate?

How did you prepare to emigrate?

How long did you plan to live in emigration?

What were your expectations and plans in a new country?

What was the reaction of your relatives to your decision to emigrate?

II. Living in emigration:

How did you adapt in a new country?

What was the most difficult?

How did you learn the new language of the country?

How were you received by local people?

What was your first job in emigration?

What have you achieved in emigration?

How has your / your family's life changed in a new place?

How do you / your family retain its Lithuanianess in emigration?

What Lithuanian holidays do you celebrate?

Do you participate in local Lithuanian activities? What are they?

Do you get together with other Lithuanians or Lithuanian families?

Do you have friends among locals?

How do you get news about Lithuania?

What is your identity today: a Lithuanian, half Lithuanian or..?

Has emigration met your expectations?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of living abroad?

What did emigration give you? What did it take from you?

What do you miss in Lithuania?

Have you considered the possibility of going back to your homeland?

III. If the person returned to Lithuania:

Why did you decide to come back?

Was it difficult to start your life anew in Lithuania?

What do you think about your decision to emigrate?

Do you have plans to emigrate again? If so, which country and why?

IV. If the person still lives in emigration:

How often do you return to Lithuania?

Do you have plans to return to live in Lithuania permanently?

What do you think about your decision to emigrate?

V. Person's data:

Where and when were you born?

Where did you live in Lithuania?

What school(s) in Lithuania did you go to?

What was your occupation in Lithuania?

Is there anything you would like to add?