

SPECIAL FEATURE

Oral History From Below

Staughton Lynd

Twenty-five years ago, Jesse Lemisch, I, and other New Left historians called for history to be written from below, from the bottom up. Jesse Lemisch argued that history was too often written as the history of “great white men.” We said that there was needed a history of “the inarticulate,” by which of course was meant, not persons who did not speak, but persons who did not write: persons who did not leave behind a trail of documents.

Inevitably the proposal for a history from below led to a great deal of oral history. The way to find out about people who talk but do not write is, obviously, to talk to them. However, while history from below requires oral history, oral history is not necessarily history from below. There can be an oral history of Great White Men; witness the Columbia University Oral History Project, at least as it was in the 1960s.

Accordingly it may be useful to talk about the particular kind of oral history appropriate to doing history from below. I want to talk about oral history as part of a life style that in nineteenth century Russia was called “going to the people,” and in contemporary Latin America has been described as a “preferential option for the poor.” I want to talk about oral history as a project, not just to observe and record poor people, but also to empower them.

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There is a Spanish verb *acompañar*, “to accompany.” As used for example by Archbishop Oscar Romero in his last pastoral letter, accompaniment does *not* mean to disguise one’s identity, nor to give up one’s independent judgment and conscience. The priest or nun remains a priest or nun, not a *campesino* or a steel worker. The teacher still teaches, the lawyer is more needed than ever as an advocate. To accompany another person is to walk beside that person; to become a companion; to be present. In accompanying, the professionally-trained person chooses the world of poor and working people as a theater of action. By offering to tape-record the experience of poor and working people, we are implicitly saying: “Your life is important. It’s worth my time to talk to you. It may be worth your time to talk to me. People like me need to know what people like you have learned.”

Here are aspects of oral history from below as accompaniment:

1. *Interviewer and interviewee, historian and historical protagonist, meet as equals.*

Before my wife and I began to do oral history together, Alice had formulated this idea in the context of draft counseling. “When I do draft counseling,” she said, “there are two experts in the room. I am an expert in certain regulations and procedures, and the person whom I counsel is an expert on his life, and what he wants to do with it.”

Last spring our youngest daughter lived for a month in an Indian village in Guatemala. No one apart from Martha spoke English. Only a few persons spoke Spanish. The villagers spoke Quiche, which Martha did not speak or understand. She and they communicated partly through weaving. The villagers taught Martha backstrap weaving, and she managed to have constructed the wider upright loom familiar in North America, and to begin to demonstrate how to use it. In her journal Martha wrote in part as follows:

I feel that a lot of researchers, anthropologists, etc., do not find this equalizing way to relate. I decided that I wanted to get to know the women in the weaving group, and that gaining their trust was more important to me than actively looking for answers to my own questions about them. I made a decision that I would learn whatever they felt like sharing with me. I did not want to “use them” for research purposes. I chose not to ask a lot of sensitive questions about politics, the history of their community, massacres, about

male/female relationships, etc. I did not conduct any formal interviews with anyone. However, once the family I lived with and members of the group knew me better, they voluntarily shared with me about several aspects of their lives.

2. *Transcription of the interview for use in the historian's written presentations to an academic audience is not the only purpose of an interview, and perhaps not the most important.*

When Alice and I came to do our book *Rank and File* about half of the so-called interviews were actually presentations at community forums, or at smaller workshops, where young people in the community could receive an oral tradition from persons further along life's path. We said in a preface to the second edition:

In working-class communities, even relatively recent history often becomes lost to the young people growing up there. In *Rank and File* we sought to provide occasions for older persons—as it were, the elders of the tribe—to recall their personal histories in the presence of the community. Thus, the purpose of the interviews reported in *Rank and File* was emphatically not to provide raw material for conventional academic history by ourselves or anyone else. Instead, the idea was to get beyond a situation in which one group of people (workers) experiences history, and another group of people (professional historians) interprets the experience for them. We wanted to see those who make history also analyze and record it.

Partly for this reason, “oral history” seems a more appropriate term than “interview,” and I shall use it in the remainder of these remarks.

3. *Those who provide oral histories can themselves help to verify and correct the information provided.*

Oral historians are frequently criticized for the inaccuracy of their informants. It is suggested that we should pay more heed to the recollections of the rich and powerful, and to documents.

It is true that oral histories are often inaccurate as to dates and durations. This summer three men who took part in a hunger strike in Jneid prison in the occupied West Bank five years ago told us about it in three separate conversations. Each thought the strike lasted a different number of days.

As to other matters, those who provide oral histories are often remarkably precise. Moreover, the things they remember frequently cannot be verified by the rich and powerful, because the rich and

powerful were not present; and cannot be checked against documents which either don't exist or, like Israeli records of prison hunger strikes, will not be accessible for years to come.

One precaution is to do what any lawyer does in preparing a witness for trial: to ask, "Did you see that yourself or did someone else tell you about it?" Sometimes the answer will be, "My father told me." But sometimes the answer will not only confirm that the witness was present but trigger a torrent of new detail. "I was here (pointing) and the woman who was killed was there (pointing across the room). I can still hear the screaming of the people: 'Bring the ambulance! Bring the cars! There is a woman killed!'"

Another precaution, which likewise will not merely verify but enrich, is to convene a group of persons who shared the same experience. I recall the Boston Draft Resistance Group, circa 1969, sitting in a circle with the tape recorder on the floor in the middle. After getting the conversation started I simply listened to members of the group correcting and fine-tuning each other's statements. "But it was in the afternoon, don't you remember?" "That guy with the funny name was there; what did he call himself?" And then when someone finds just the right words, or remembers a telling detail, a long pause, finally punctuated by a muttered, "Yeah," or, "You got that right." It is time to prime the pump again with a few follow-up questions, or to turn off the recorder.

4. In a history that reflects the reality of life for poor and working people, the ultimate subject of that history is likely to be not the individual, but the group.

Far be it from me even to seem to suggest that poor and working people are somehow more uniform or monolithic than people who are not poor. The last thing one should want to do is to mute or obscure the way in which all around the globe women, who have been part of a group of silent listeners while the men talked, are stepping forward from the margins of the conversation as variegated individuals.

My point is simply that we who are relatively individualistic, who tend to live and move and have our being in nuclear families, not extended families, may misperceive the texture of communities in which we do oral history. Palestinians whom my wife and I interviewed spoke of how, when their parents' home in the Ein

El Hilweh refugee camp was twice destroyed by the Israeli army, family members from all over the world sent money to rebuild the house “because that’s part of our culture.” The Guatemalan Indians with whom my daughter lived asked her why she was not at home, helping her elderly parents.

Was it interviewer or interviewee who chose the title, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*?¹ Probably the interviewer, for the interviewee says, in the first sentences of her oral history: “I’d like to stress that it’s not only *my* life, it’s also the testimony of my people. . . . The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too. My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans.” It’s also interesting that the interviewing took place during a week in Paris at the interviewer’s home, a scenario that in itself divorced one person’s oral history from its natural collective background.

Here is a final example of the group content of oral history from below. My wife and I together with our friend Sam Bahour began to do oral histories with Palestinians just after the Gulf War, in spring 1991. A year after we began, I was asked to review a book by Donald Katz called *Home Fires*.² The book is a wonderful oral history of the members of a family that Katz, mistakenly I think, calls “middle-class.” All four children in this family became rebels in the Sixties. In each case this required a dramatic break from family values.

I have always been judgmental, not to say self-righteous, about the fact that so many participants in the Movement of the Sixties proved to be sprinters rather than long-distance runners. Reading *Home Fires*, I was struck by the contrast between the young people it describes and the Palestinians whose oral histories we had been recording. No wonder it was so hard for young Americans to persevere politically, to be long-distance runners. There was typically very little support from their family culture. Palestinian fathers and mothers, too, like fathers and mothers everywhere, fear for the welfare of their children. But when those children come into harm’s way, when they are arrested, interrogated, indefinitely de-

¹*I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, edited and with an Introduction by Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, translated by Ann Wright (London: Verso, 1984).

²Donald Katz, *Home Fires: An Intimate Portrait of One Middle-Class Family in Post-war America* (New York: Aaron Asher Books, 1992).

tained, Palestinian parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and younger siblings, stand behind the vulnerable member of the family because the cause is one to which the family has been committed since before the child was born. Our collection of oral histories, which had begun as a chronicle of heroic individuals, came to be in part a story of the persistence of families.

5. It is their story, not our story: they not we are those who do oral history.

Studs Terkel said in an interview with the *New York Times*, May 6, 1992:

It's like prospecting. The transcripts are the ore. I've got to get to the gold dust. It's got to be the person's truth, highlighted. It's not just putting down what people say.

The metaphor is terrific, and yet the oral history described falls short of accompaniment. I would vary it by saying to the person telling his or her history: "Let me hold the screen. Sift the dirt through and tell me when you see gold." Here are two little examples.

Early in the 1980s I found myself recording an oral history with a Youngstown steelworker, Gerald Dickey. When Youngstown's steel mills closed, Gerald was the person who first suggested that they should be reopened under worker-community ownership. "Where did you get the idea?" I asked. We were using an old reel-to-reel tape recorder. All through the first reel, Gerald fumbled with the answer. The tape stopped. I turned it over. Suddenly Brother Dickey's face brightened: "*Now* I remember..." We were off and running. I felt that had I come twenty-four hours later, the memory might have been gone forever, and there would have been nothing I could do about it.

I have recently come to know a man named Brian Willson, who on September 1, 1987, sat down on the track at the Concord Naval Weapons Station near Oakland to block a train carrying munitions to dockside for shipment to Central America. The train didn't stop. Brian's legs were cut off, but miraculously he survived. He wanted me to help him tell his story in a book.

We collected transcripts of speeches, articles, published interviews. There was a mass of material. One publisher rejected it. Brian took off for South America.

I decided to start over, using Brian's own words about his life that had appeared here and there in the many pages of political argument and explanation. A statue emerged from the marble. Brian was an all-American boy who had grown up near the Chautauqua Institute in western New York State. Brian's father, an often-unemployed salesman, was virulently Christian and racist; he listened to Fulton Lewis, Jr., and made lists of suspected Communists in the State Department. Brian himself, when he graduated from high school, wanted to be an FBI agent.

Then came Vietnam, where it was Brian Willson's task to inspect the effectiveness of United States air strikes on Vietnamese villages. One day, he writes,

I looked at the face of a young mother on the ground whose eyes appeared to be open as she had two children in one arm, another child in the other. Upon closer examination I realized she and her children had been killed by bomb fragments. Napalm had apparently burned much of her face, including her eyelids. I stared into her eyes from a close distance, leaning over to do so. Tears streamed down my face....

I looked at that mother's face, what was left of it, and it flashed at that point in my mind that the whole idea of the threat of Communism was ridiculous. Somehow I couldn't see Communism on her face. I remember looking at that woman's face and thinking, "I wonder what a Communist looks like?" All I saw was the face of a mother no older than twenty holding her children. All of them were dead. I said, "My God, this bombing, this war, is a lie. I've been living a lie. What does all this mean? These people are just persons, just human beings"....

The Vietnamese lieutenant accompanying me asked why I was crying. I stood straight up and turned to him and replied, "Because she is my sister, and these are my children, too." I have no idea from where that feeling and response came....

The book has since been published under the title *On Third World Legs*.³

Summing up: In accompanying, one does not pretend to be the same as the person beside whom one travels. Nor does one

³S. Brian Willson, *On Third World Legs*, with an introduction by Staughton Lynd (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1992).

romanticize that person, projecting virtues that are not there or condoning evils that are all too real. One expresses a preferential option for the poor and marginalized in deciding to live amongst them for a time, and to assist, if possible, in articulating and transmitting their collective experience.

“Oral history from below” requires the historian to enter into the lives of poor and working people who are that history’s protagonists. Of necessity it exposes the historian’s own class and cultural limitations to the light of common day. It is painful. It requires personal, not just intellectual, risktaking. Perhaps it will seem worthwhile only to intellectuals whose political and/or religious project is the remaking of society through the agency of the poor.

During the years 1978-1980, when Oscar Romero was Archbishop of El Salvador and the formation of Christian base communities in urban slums and villages went on apace, a group of pastoral workers and their constituents collectively produced a liturgy called the Salvadoran Popular Mass. Here are the words which begin the recessional to the Salvadoran Popular Mass:

Cuando los pobres crean en los pobres,
Ya podremos cantar libertad

(When the poor come to believe in the poor,
Then indeed we will be able to sing of freedom)

May our oral history be measured by that standard.