



**Pete Pesonen &  
Kirsti Salmi-Niklander**

## **Studying Industrial Oral History during the Pandemic – Ethical and Methodological Questions**

### **Abstract**

This article discusses an oral history project that examines homer production at the Högfors Ironworks in Karkkila. This was a cooperative project of the University of Helsinki, the Finnish Labour Archives and the Finnish Foundry Museum in Karkkila. A “homer” (firabeli in Finnish) is an object made for one’s own benefit by a worker using his or her factory’s equipment and materials.

The article focuses on ethical and methodological issues affecting the study of industrial oral history during the COVID-19 pandemic. What kind of practical and ethical challenges were faced, how could they be solved and how did they affect a project? These issues are reflected in relation to recent academic discussions on conducting oral history interviews during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the process in numerous ways. The conducting of interviews required a unique solution based on the local services of Karkkila. The risks for interviewers and interviewees were minimized. However, the downside was that a video interview during the long pandemic period might have been a psychologically stressing experience for some interviewees.

The interviewees’ ideas about homer practices were similar to those of the previous oral history collections. The major distinction between the Karkkila collection and the previous collections lies in the foundry industry itself.

**Keywords:** oral history, industrial heritage, interview, methodology, pandemic, research ethics

This article focuses on an educational, oral history and exhibition project that examined homer production at the Högfors Ironworks in Karkkila. This was a cooperative project by the University of Helsinki, the Finnish Labour Archives and the Finnish Foundry Museum<sup>1</sup> in Karkkila, and it was carried out during the spring term of 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic affected the process in numerous ways, and it required testing new methods for interviews and exhibition design. Both the exceptional conditions during the pandemic and the sensitive research theme created ethical challenges. We had different roles in the project: Kirsti Salmi-Niklander is a university lecturer in folklore studies at University of Helsinki, she lives in Karkkila and has worked remotely throughout most of the pandemic. She took care of student supervision and practical implementation of the interviews, whereas Pete Pesonen was responsible for archiving and preliminary analysis of the interviews.

The focus of our article is on ethical and methodological issues affecting the study of industrial oral history during the pandemic: How could the ethical and practical challenges of conducting oral history interviews be resolved? How did the way in which the interviews were conducted affect the project? These issues are reflected in relation to recent discussions on conducting oral history interviews during the pandemic, published on the websites of the US-based Oral History Association and the UK-based Oral History Society and in a special issue of the *Oral History Review* 47(2), 2020.

The article also addresses another important question: Did the Högfors interviews reveal new knowledge about the practices and norms related to homers? This question is approached by comparing the oral history narratives of homer-making in Högfors with previously collected materials on homers. A “homer” (*firabeli* in Finnish) is an object made for one’s own benefit by a worker using his or her factory’s equipment and materials. The background of the project was premised on Pete Pesonen’s doctoral dissertation on homers. Pete Pesonen compiled a comprehensive oral history collection on homers for his research.

Well, in my opinion, the homer is made orthodoxly when it’s made of the house’s material without permission. (--) On your own time, and with permission, a man could make it. It was also kinda homer, but as I see it, a real proper homer was made on the factory’s time and with a factory’s materials, and without permission. (All the interview quotes are translated by the authors from Finnish interview transcriptions. The collection “Workshop school alumni interviews”, Interview: 13132, The Finnish Labour Archives)

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1 Finnish Foundry Museum (Suomen Valimomuseo) is one unit of the Ironworks Museum Senkka (Ruukkimuseo Senkka) in Karkkila. The Museum is run by the Foundry Museum Foundation.

The above interviewee argues that a real “homer” was made during working hours, using a factory’s materials and without the permission of one’s supervisors. Despite this person’s opinion, the oral history of homer-making in the Finnish metal and workshop industry illustrates the fact that the shop floor was in reality much more diverse. The making of homers was not openly condoned, as one has always needed the employer’s permission to make such items. Nevertheless, homer-making was commonly tolerated by supervisors. Local permission practices have varied significantly, though, and additionally, the workers have interpreted the rules in such a way that benefits them the most. Mid-level management has interpreted the employer’s instructions in its own way and extended both official and unofficial permits for homer-making. This selective permissiveness towards homer making makes it troublesome to differentiate between perks, homer-making and pilfering (Pesonen 2018; 2020).

So, this article defines a homer as an object made for one’s own purpose or pleasure by a worker using his or her factory’s equipment and materials. It is essential that homers are produced for personal use by an employee in the workplace. In most cases, they are produced during working hours. The term “homer” was first used in the English translation of Miklós Harasztis’s book *Worker in a worker’s state*. It is a description of work at a Hungarian tractor factory. The term “homer” is now currently used in American English. But another term for the practice in the US is “government jobs”. In British English, homers are called “foreigners” or “foreign orders”. French historian Michel de Certeau refers to the phenomenon of “la perruque”, as they are called in France, in volume 1 of his influential book *L’invention du quotidien, Arts de faire* (1980), which was translated into English in 1984. (Anteby 2008a, 29–31; Oliver 2009, 27; Gouldner 1954, 13; Dalton 1959, 205.) French sociologist Michel Anteby has researched the phenomenon from the organisational standpoint (Anteby 2003; 2006; 2008a; 2008b). The phenomenon can be found in all professions, but our focus is on industrial work in Finland.

In the public discussion, homer-making is usually considered a form of stealing from the employer. The casual observer may condemn homer-making as theft because employers and law enforcement officials typically view homer-making as an illegal practice. The inherent controversiality makes the subject troublesome to delimit for the interviewees of the oral history collection. One of Pesonen’s starting points was to question the negative public image of homer-making. The purpose was to research workers’ clandestine factory culture instead of exposing the illegal habits of the workers, thereby including homers as a part of the industrial workers’ factory tradition. Like the Australian folklorist Graham Seal has pointed out:

While the foreigner [homer] is the direct, tangible outcome of the workers' attitude to their work, their workplace and those who control it, these objects are only the physical manifestations of a mostly intangible work culture. (Seal 2009, 45.)

One of the challenges of researching homers is how to discuss the issue without condemning the interviewees while on the other hand striking a balance between delimiting the research phenomenon enough for the interviewees and not delimiting it to such an extent that it would influence the interviewees' narrations (Pesonen 2022).

### **Changing plans**

Planning of the project was initiated in 2019 as a collaboration between the Finnish Foundry Museum, the Finnish Labour Archives and the University of Helsinki. The project was linked to the oral history project "Yhteen hitsattu porukka", organized by the Industrial Union and Labour Archives. Industrial workers and local trade union chapters were encouraged to write their memoirs on factory traditions and to participate in interviews on the changing conditions impacting industrial work. The oral history interviews in Karkkila were conducted after the oral history project had been completed. The Emil Aaltonen Foundation gave a grant to the Karkkila project, which made it possible to begin planning the oral history and museology courses.

The courses belonged to a course of study called "Cultural Heritage of Changing Industrial Work", organized by Kirsti Salmi-Niklander. The first part of this course of study was an online class with the same title offered in May 2020. The interdisciplinary class included recorded lectures, assignments and a final essay. The class was originally to take place in the typical face-to-face teaching format, but it had to be transferred online with short advance notice. Online teaching was new to all lecturers, but nevertheless it turned out to be an encouraging experience. The class was also freely available for Open University students, and 18 students completed it. The lecturers were Kirsti Salmi-Niklander, Pete Pesonen, Niina Naarminen, Risto Turunen, Tiina Valpola and Tiina Äikäs. The lectures discussed continuities and changes in industrial work and industrial heritage, material aspects of industrial work and oral and literary cultures in industrial communities. Karkkila's industrial heritage was discussed as a special case study, since both Kirsti Salmi-Niklander and architect Tiina Valpola have done long-term research on Karkkila, where they have lived since the 1980s (Hänninen, Salmi-Niklander & Valpola 1999; Salmi-Niklander 2004). Högfors Foundry celebrated its 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary on May 17, 2020, but the actual celebrations had to be postponed due to the pandemic and its restrictions.

The oral history and museology courses were supposed to take place during the fall term of 2020, but they were postponed because the pandemic situation

was still uncertain in August. In November, the situation worsened rapidly. However, the book launching event on the history of the Högfors Ironworks (Kuutsa & Viitala 2020) could be organized at the Factory Hotel. An open event to present the interview and museology project to a wider local audience was to take place on November 30 – but it had to be cancelled because all public events had been restricted just a few days earlier. In this situation, we had to seriously consider whether we could proceed with planning the oral history interview project and the courses.

Janne Viitala, amanuensis of the Foundry Museum, had already discussed the project with members of the “Workshop school alumni” network [*Entiset konepajakoululaiset*]. This informal group has gathered together former students from the Högfors factory workshop school, which operated between 1942 and 1977. The school had been quite popular in the 1940s and the 1950s, and hundreds of young boys applied both from Karkkila and other parts of Finland. The school provided them with strong professional skills in the metal industry, and many students from the workshop school had long careers in the metal industry. Members of the workshop school alumni network had been active in writing the history of the school (Viitala 2017) and had provided information for the history of Högfors Ironworks (Kuutsa & Viitala 2020, 188–203, 324–334.) It was possible to recruit interviewees through this network, so we decided to proceed with the plans. However, this affected the focus and content of the interviews.

The next task was the practical implementation of the interviews and the recruitment of students for the course. Even though we could have covered the travel costs for students to conduct the interviews in person, it would have involved serious risks both for the students and the interviewees in the worsening pandemic situation. On the other hand, we could not rely on the home internet connection or video interview skills of the interviewees since most of them had already been retired for 10–20 years. The conducting of interviews required a unique solution, one based on local services: the interviews were done in a private meeting room of the Factory Hotel, which had been opened to the public by new entrepreneurs in 2019. The Factory Hotel is a former club building that the factory owners had used to entertain their guests, and it is situated next to the Foundry Museum. The interviews were done via Zoom video service. Kirsti Salmi-Niklander served as a moderator for the interviews: she opened the Zoom connection, explained the data protection practices and gave the interviewees the forms to be filled in for the Labour Archives. The students conducted the actual interviews with a Zoom connection from their homes. The interviews were transcribed at the Labor Archives, and the interviewees could read the transcript before giving their final consent for archiving.

This way of conducting interviews combines experiences derived from teleworking with oral history interview techniques. Based on Pesonen's experiences with phone interviewing, we found it necessary to have visual contact with the interviewees since the first contacts were made by phone. The preparation process for the phone interviews is an important part of building confidence between interviewer and interviewee (Heimo, Juvonen, & Kurvinen 2021, 5, 29–30). Hanna-Mari Ikola (2017, 272–273) has discussed the practical and methodological reasons for conducting phone interviews: though these reasons can relate to safety, a phone interview can also provide the interviewee a feeling of privacy, as they do not need to take special care with their outfit or clean their home.

Since our oral history project also includes educational aspects, many people were involved in the interviews process: Janne Viitala made the first contacts, and he knew most of the interviewees through earlier historical projects and museum events; Kirsti Salmi-Niklander confirmed the time and place of the actual interviews by phone and met the interviewees in person; the students conducted the actual interviews; and Pete Pesonen took care of the archiving and transcription process.

The next open question was the recruitment of students for the course: Would the students be interested and ready to conduct interviews from a distance? It turned out that the students were actually quite motivated to learn about distance interviewing methods: eleven students from the Master's Programme in Cultural Heritage signed up, two of them through the Open University. The course was held online, as with most teaching at the University of Helsinki during the academic year 2020–2021.

### **Oral history interviews during the pandemic**

During the oral history course, we discussed the ethical issues related to conducting oral history interviews during the pandemic. These discussions were based on the guidelines formulated by the Oral History Association and Oral History Society. The websites provide detailed technical information on remote interviewing. The Oral History Association website contains Decision Tree, an aid for visualizing the ethical issues and evaluations involved when making the decision to conduct an oral history interview. The Oral History Association's instructions for remote interviewing are dated August 27, 2020. In the introduction, the authors of the website formulate the importance of remote interviewing from a longer term perspective:

Though the current environment requires us to set aside face-to-face interviewing, these resources are intended to inform our practice beyond the international crisis created

by COVID-19. There are many reasons for in-person interviewing to be our default, but those who developed this guide feel that remote interviewing should have a place in our practice even when it is safe to resume meeting face to face.

The Oral History Society's website has been updated several times, with the latest update having been done on 8 February 2021, and it includes guidelines for both remote recording and interviewing in person. The guidelines include a [checklist](#) of the issues to be considered before doing interviews in person. The guidelines have been modified according to the changing situation, which resulted in the release of COVID restrictions during the summer of 2021: "Even if government guidelines are no longer mandatory, a project, interviewer and interviewee may still prefer to include some precautionary measures to minimise the risk of infection."

When going through the Oral History Society's guidelines with the students, it became inevitable they would note the differences between the pandemic situation in Britain and Finland. In the UK, the COVID death rate per capita has been quite high, whereas in Finland it has thus far remained among the lowest in Europe. Formulated in 2020, the guidelines of both the Oral History Association and Oral History Society gave clear recommendations for postponing face-to-face interviews or else conducting them remotely. On the other hand, the technical solutions for remote interviewing provided in the guidelines were not realistic in the case of Finland, where landline phones hardly exist anymore.

The guidelines also assumed that a reasonable solution would be to postpone the interview until the end of the pandemic. In 2020, this was expected to occur in the relatively near future. By now, it has become evident that we have to learn how to cope with the pandemic and that the COVID-19 virus will be circulating in the population probably for many years. The guidelines also inevitably define the home of the interviewee as the place of the interview, and they discuss the risks related to the interviewer entering another person's home. The interviewer's home has traditionally been the most common and recommended place for conducting an oral history interview. However, the recently published guidebook recommends that the interviewee can choose or suggest the most comfortable place for the interviews, which might be the home, the workplace or some peaceful and secluded public space (Heimo et al. 2021, 23). During the lockdowns, suitable places for interviews have usually not been available because all public spaces have been closed. We discussed these issues with the students, and they wrote essays in which they evaluated a real or imagined interview situation based on the guidelines and Decision Tree model.

Specific local circumstances in Karkkila affected the implementation of the interviews. The first challenge had to do with the availability of a safe and neu-

tral space for the interviews: the Factory Hotel functioned during the winter 2020–2021 as a “staycation” hotel with a minimal staff and safety measures in place, and the restaurant was only open on weekends in February. The private meeting room had a stable internet connection, and it was reserved for the interviews; otherwise, the hotel was very quiet. Only on one day did the interviews coincide with catering for a film crew, but the entering and leaving of the interviewees could be organized so that they did not encounter the other group. The interviewees could come to the Factory Hotel by foot or with their own car.

At the beginning of the interview, Kirsti Salmi-Niklander briefly presented the forms to be filled in and withdrew to the corridor during the actual interview. Contact with the interviewees was minimized, masks were used (not during the actual video interview) and surfaces cleaned between the interviews. On the other hand, the short meetings between interviews with old friends and schoolmates were apparently important and refreshing for the interviewees. These short face-to-face meetings helped create a casual and informal atmosphere for the video interviews. Some interviewees brought with them objects, photographs and notebooks related to the interview topic.

Specific local circumstances during the pandemic had an effect on the interviews. The pandemic situation in Karkkila remained quite calm in 2020: by the end of November 2020, only five COVID cases had been confirmed in this small town of nearly 9000 inhabitants.<sup>2</sup> The restrictions had been severe during spring of 2020, and they were tightened again at the end of the year. As Karkkila is situated in the north-western corner of Uusimaa province, local officials followed the same restrictions as in the Helsinki capital region. During the pandemic, Karkkila was isolated in many ways: people who normally would commute to Helsinki and the capital area worked from home, including most secondary school students. The most extreme measure was the closure of the province of Uusimaa for three weeks in April 2020. During these weeks, the police and the army guarded the border of Uusimaa just a short distance from Karkkila, and people were allowed to cross the border only with a special reason. This situation created collective feelings of frustration and isolation when local festivals and cultural events were cancelled one after another. It also created a feeling of relative safety, which turned out to be an illusion.

In January 2021, the Alpha variant worsened the pandemic situation in Finland. At the end of January, when the interviews should have begun taking place, the COVID cases suddenly increased in Karkkila. The Componenta Foundry had many COVID cases, and the infections spread to families and schools. Though the municipality began vaccinating people, efforts proceed-

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2 According to statistics from the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), 378 COVID cases had been confirmed in Karkkila by December 20, 2021.



ed slowly. Most of the interviewees were active retired citizens in their early 80s, but at the time of the interviews in February they were still waiting for their first vaccinations. In this type of situation, safety issues had to be carefully reconsidered. One of the measures taken was Kirsti Salmi-Niklander's choice to "self-quarantine" during the interview period: she worked remotely, visiting Helsinki and the university only a few times during the spring term of 2021. Besides short visits to the local supermarket once or twice a week, the interviews were the only face-to-face (or mask-to-mask) social events for her. Karkkila in fact hardly offered any social events at the time, with even the library only open to pick up reserved books.

During such a period of extended and frustrating isolation, the interviews were positive experiences for all people involved. The interviewees could revisit memories from their youth, their study years at the Workshop School and their working life. The students prepared quite well for the interviews, and a confidential dialogue was created with the video connection. However, the downside was that a video interview during the long pandemic period might have been an intense and psychologically stressing experience for some interviewees.

### **Comparing oral history interviews**

Next, we compare the oral history interviews that were conducted by students involved in the project with the interviews collected as part of Pesonen's doctoral dissertation research on homers in the Finnish metal and workshop industry.

The two collections differ substantially when compared quantitatively. The Karkkila project's collection, i.e. the interviews conducted by students, consists of eleven interviews, while the oral history collection for Pesonen's dissertation research includes narratives from 101 different persons. The dissertation collection can be divided into oral history interviews and reminiscence writings: the entire collection includes 70 interviews and 11 written memories. Most of the interviews were personal interviewees, with only six being group interviews. Pesonen conducted 52 interviews, and one-fifth of them were conducted as live meetings, with 80 per cent being done by phone. The collected material is archived in the Finnish Labour Archives and is now part of The Commission of Finnish Labour Tradition memory-based source collection (Pesonen 2020, 132, 159).

Eight of the project's interviewees had studied at the factory's workshop school in the 1950s, 1960s or 1970s, and their work careers ranged from the 1950s to the early 2000s, the time frame encompassed by the interviews in the collection. The Karkkila project's interviewees had worked in higher level positions: as supervisors (4/10) and in other white and grey collar jobs (sales, laborant and technician). In contrast, the majority of Pesonen's interviewees had been shop floor workers: sheet metal welders, machinists and lathe operators.

The dissertation collection includes only a few interviews with people who had worked in leading positions: two technicians, five engineers and 14 supervisors.

The preconception was that the interviewees' status in the industrial hierarchy would affect their stance on homer-making. However, the Karkkila interviewees' ideas about homer practices were similar to those of the interviewees from the previous collection.

Like in the previously collected material, homer-making in Högfors foundry emerged in the interviews as a relevant part of the workplace culture rather than as an unwanted criminal habit practiced by a few workers. All the interviewees described liaisons between workers and supervisors in relation to homer activities.

Well, let's just say, supervisors turned a blind eye to that behaviour, when it didn't bother one's working. Obviously, the work got done, the house's tasks first and homers [done] while between work tasks. But of course, the management of the factory, they didn't approve of any kind of homers. But those done with permission, which were made with the homer licence, it was a different case. So, it was prohibited in that way. (Interview: 13133, The Finnish Labour Archives)

One interviewee who had worked at the Högfors foundry from 1967 to 1977 as a supervisor in the core section of the foundry described the supervisors' approach to homer-making in a manner similar to several other descriptions of homer-making in Finnish industry, where employers tried to restrain homer-making by imposing clauses to workshop codes of conduct, and also how workers and their supervisors reacted to the codes of conduct. The workers and their supervisors operated in an organisational grey zone, where they engaged together in officially forbidden but nevertheless tolerated practices. (Anteby 2008b; 2006, 34–35; Pesonen 2018.)

Like I said, homers were acknowledged, and a blind eye was turned and so on. But then, if someone took some cauldron, pot or an actual production item, which was supposed to be sold from the factory, it was a theft. And when you got caught, it was, no doubt, a pink slip; it happened a few times. (Interview: 13133, The Finnish Labour Archives)

Crucial to the definition of the homer is the fact that the manufactured object should be distinctly personal and differ from the factory's own production line. Occasionally, workers improved upon or decorated the factory's product to make it more personal and to prevent it from being labelled a theft.

The interviewees emphasized that homers were made for their own or for their friends' or relatives' benefit. Homers made for (monetary) sale were strictly forbidden by the worker community, as such a practice violated workers'

occupational ethics and was always considered theft. Still, making homers for relatives and friends was commonplace. Homers were traded non-monetarily – for services, favours or alcohol (Pesonen 2020, 153–156.)

The major distinction between the Karkkila collection and the previous collection lies in the industry itself. Besides mass production, the foundry cast limited amounts of decorative art products. This enabled the parallel (homer) production of expensive items.

Interviewee: Yeah, then it was, there was at the most even three guys making those. And it went a little like, that was a must-do situation, because it wasn't anymore that honest, that job.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. But that, what I am asking now is, did they do their own models or a house's models for their own benefit?

Interviewee: Yes, just like that!

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. Well, then I do understand it quite well! It was competing production.

Interviewee: Yes, yes. And the foundry paid their wages for the day work, and during the evenings they earned more by selling the artefacts that they had cast during the day, on the town. (Interview: 13134, The Finnish Labour Archives)

Additionally, homer-making for sales purposes was strictly prohibited. It was a disadvantage to the company, and for that reason, it was condemned. The type of homer-making described by the interviewees from the art foundry betray an anomaly when compared to the previously collected oral history. The anomaly results from the character of the foundry industry. The manufacturing process at the foundry consists of several separate stages, from mould making to casting the metal for the mould, cooling it, and then removing the mould material. The single cast mould can be used several times, which obviously is an advantage for the industry, but it also makes it possible to mass-produce artefacts that were designed to be cast as limited editions. The lack of surveillance resulted in the series of occurrences described by one interviewee.

And then in the mid-80s, they gave me the keys to the art foundry and said, "you should put a stop to the homer-making". And I made it end. We made a net cage, put up the fence around the entire foundry, and the only keys available were in my own and XX's (art melder) pockets, no one else. And the situation was, like, that they even said to me, "surely one can make those (homers), but you have to know each and every one cast and made, and then you are responsible, that you've given permission". (Interview: 13134, The Finnish Labour Archives)

The unorthodox homer-making habits at the art foundry were traditionally contained through surveillance by the supervisor. The system is grounded in trust that the supervisor will use her/his discretion. The Karkkila interviews portray homer-making at the art foundry from a different perspective. One of the art founders from Högfors Ironworks was also interviewed. His description of the foundry supported what the supervisor had said: “It was a kind of corner there, and the net cage was around it only.” The interviewee tried to evade the question concerning his own homer-making practices.

Interviewer: Did you make own homers? Founder: Well, there might be some individual of that kind. Interviewer: Right. Was it allowed? Founder: Well, one could be made once in a while. It was certainly not allowed, but one can get a little task of that kind made. (Interview: 13130, The Finnish Labour Archives)

The interviewee’s evasive stance to the questions about his personal homer-making practices cast a shadow over better understanding homer-making at the art foundry. It could indicate a prohibited stand on homer-making in the art foundry. The interviewee tries to evade the question and the interviewer reacts politely by turning the interview to other questions. A more practiced interviewer might have posed follow-up questions regarding the interviewee’s homer-making practices, as evading the question is the most common way of indicating that the interviewee is uncomfortable with answering it (Kurvinen & Yoken 2022, 53-55.). Lynn Abrams has noted that “the researcher cannot always know the reason, but we can observe the existence of evasion and hazard an explanation” (Abrams 2016, 104). The interviewer returned to the topic of homers at the end of the interview by asking:

Interviewer: What about those homers elsewhere in the workshop? Did they make them mostly for their own benefit, or did they pass them also from one worker to another? (Interview: 13130, The Finnish Labour Archives)

The interviewee offered only a concise response:

Interviewee: Well, I don’t know, there were not those things. I don’t anyway know if [homers] were there (Interview: 13130, The Finnish Labour Archives)

Unfortunately, the founder was one of the few interviewees from either collection to totally disregard the main theme of the collection, homers. The muted stance of the founder is exceptional in that it does not dismiss homer-making as exaggerated or repudiate it entirely. Despite the public image

of homer-making as rather clandestine and secretive in nature, nearly all the other interviewees found it surprisingly easy to discuss the practice.

According to Pesonen's experiences with oral history interviews concerning homer-making, the talkativeness of the interviewees is not as peculiar as it first seems. Their experiences support the fact that almost every interviewee who had worked in the metal industry was familiar with the phenomenon and had an interest in discussing it. The phone interviews proved to be a good enough substitute for face-to-face interviews as a method for approaching the topic. (Pesonen 2022, unpublished manuscript.) The phone as a medium for conducting interviews may be more favourable when dealing with sensitive topics. According to Susanne Vogl (2013, 136), "the specific contact situation on the telephone might make the interview appear less binding, which could result in a less socially desirable answer", and thus, the risk of the respondent "losing face" over the telephone may disappear.

The reason for recruiting the interviewees was emphasized in the telephone interviews. Personal contact with the interviewees during the recruitment process was important for creating mutual trust and honesty. Pesonen's recruiting method involved organizing events where potential interviewees gathered to hear a presentation on the oral history collecting project. After the presentation, the topic was publicly discussed and, at the end, volunteers signed up to be interviewed (Pesonen 2022, unpublished manuscript). In contrast to Pesonen's previous research project, interviewees were recruited for this project by phone because of restrictions on gathering in public, making recruiting interviewees in person unthinkable. Secondly, the interviews were done over Zoom, which may have eased the loss of personal contact typical of live interviews by creating for the interviewee and interviewer the possibility to see each other and have eye contact. The conditions for the interviews might have supported the openness and talkativeness of the interviewees. Although the students were mostly novices in interviewing, they succeeded in creating an open and safe space for the interviews under exceptional conditions.

### **Museum exhibition "Secret casts" (*Salaa valetut*)**

The materials gathered as part of the oral history course were transcribed and submitted to the Labour Archives, and the materials can be accessed by those interested in the museology project. In this project, museology students planned and constructed an exhibition for the Galleria Bremer at the Foundry Museum. The responsible teacher for the museology course was Nina Robbins, a lecturer in museology at the University of Helsinki, and she taught the course in collaboration with Pete Pesonen and Kirsti Salmi-Niklander. Eight students attended the museology course, five of whom also did the oral history interviews. The

pandemic situation still worsened in March and April, so most of the exhibition design and planning was done online. The students visited Karkkila and the Foundry Museum in mid-March of 2021, with careful safety measures in place. The museum had a small collection of homer-type objects, but most of the exhibition objects were on loan from the interviewees and several other donors.

The manuscript for the exhibition was based on the interviews, while museum visitors could also listen to some excerpts from the interviews. The exhibition was set up during the first week of May. On Monday of that week, it became clear that the museum and the exhibition “Salaa valetut” (*Secret casts*) could actually be opened to the public the following Saturday, on May 8<sup>th</sup>. However, the safety measures were still very strict, and only a maximum of six people were allowed to visit the exhibition at the same time. The exhibition was set up during four intensive days of work, and presentations were given to small groups of interviewees and donors on Friday. However, no official opening ceremony could be organized, and most students did not have a chance to meet the interviewees in person. During the summer of 2021, the exhibition had nearly 3400 visitors, which was double the numbers of visitors during an average summer.<sup>3</sup> Karkkila became a popular target for excursions for people in the capital region, especially due to an article published in *Helsingin Sanomat* on July 15, 2021. It was written by Kira Gronow, a journalist who had attended the online course on industrial heritage in 2020.

### **The complex issues of ethics and vulnerability**

The articles in the special issue of *Oral History Review* discuss oral history as a tool for coping with the traumatic experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cramer 2020; Faulkenbury 2020; Sloan 2020). In our project, the theme of the interviews had nothing to do with the pandemic, and the experiences of the interviewees during the pandemic were more related to feelings of boredom, frustration and isolation than to acute illness. The issue of vulnerability has been discussed and re-evaluated during the pandemic. The guidelines proposed by the Oral History Society (p. 4) discuss this issue in some detail:

Whilst we should avoid blanket categorization of people as ‘vulnerable’ or ‘at risk’ due to assumed vulnerability, the first consideration in whether to conduct a remote interview is the degree of urgency and whether a face-to-face interview is likely to be possible once the pandemic has ceased.

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3 Information given by Tommi Kuutsa, director of Ironworks Museum Senkka (December 21, 2021)  
<https://www.helsinki.fi/fi/humanistinen-tiedekunta/ajankohtaista/museologian-opiskelijat-toteuttivat-nayttelyn-firabelitoista-karkkilan-valimomuseoon>  
[Accessed 8 May, 2022]

Age is one of the strongest risk factors for a serious case of COVID-19 and probable death. At the beginning of the pandemic, in March 2020, Finnish health officials recommended that all people over 70 years of age isolate themselves in “quarantine-like circumstances”. Later, many health experts have admitted that this actually was a dangerous statement: as a result, many healthy, active and independent senior citizens isolated themselves at home, which meant that both their physical and mental capacities started to deteriorate. The Institute of Health and Welfare has updated the instructions for senior citizens during the pandemic, emphasizing the importance of meaningful hobbies, physical exercise and social contacts.<sup>4</sup>

Most of the interviewees in our oral history project were active senior citizens, skilled workers and professionals proud of their work history. Some of them were called *firabelikeisari*, or “homer emperor”, because making homers and experimenting with different techniques was a passion and an important source of creativity for them. They had kept up their hobbies and networks even during the pandemic. The interviews and the exhibition provided them with one channel for maintaining their sense of agency and professional pride during the pandemic. On the other hand, it also brought up sensitive issues related to the norms and hierarchies of the working environment at Högfors Ironworks.

In our research project, the interviewees were not the only ones in a fragile and vulnerable position. The experiences of isolation and frustration were shared by interviewees, interviewers and researchers alike. Generally, elderly people are considered fragile and vulnerable — but as the vaccinations proceeded from the older age groups to the younger ones, the issues of risk and vulnerability have become more complex and sensitive.

If we were to conduct a similar interview project now, some new issues would need to be considered. In the Risk Assessment Checklist provided by the Oral History Society, one of the issues is formulated as follows: “Interviewer may wish to disclose if they have had one or two COVID-19 vaccinations, and may wish to enquire if the interviewee has had one or two COVID-19 vaccinations.” This would be a sensitive issue to be discussed with the interviewees, if they do not themselves voluntarily raise the question. The rapid spread of the Omicron variant has changed the situation yet again: three vaccinations cannot provide complete protection from the Omicron variant, even though the infection will in most cases be a mild one. How can ethical issues be re-evaluated in such a situation where we must expect the COVID-19 virus be circulating still for several years?

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4 <https://www.senioriliitto.fi/ajankohtaista/nyt-ikaantyneiden-ohjeistusta-on-paivitetty-tee-nain-yli-70-vuotias-seniori/> [Accessed December 20, 2021].

Based on our experiences in this interviewee project, our final statement is that the agency and self-determination of the interviewees should be respected in oral history projects. The COVID-19 pandemic continues, and even though the restrictions have been eased in most countries, it is still difficult to predict how the pandemic will proceed. The evaluation of risks and benefits involved throughout the process should be discussed with those participating in the interview project. With pandemic risks compounded by war between Russia and Ukraine, started on February 24, 2022, it is now even more important to promote and maintain a dialogue between different groups and generations.

## **AUTHORS**

Pete Pesonen is a doctoral researcher in Finnish history at the School of History, Culture and Arts Studies, University of Turku. He is finishing his doctoral thesis on industrial working culture in Finland after the Second World War from the perspective of the factory homers. Pesonen also works as a senior archivist in the Finnish Labour Archives.

Kirsti Salmi-Niklander is University Lecturer and Docent in Folklore Studies at Department of Cultures, University of Helsinki. Her research interests include vernacular literacy, oral history research, working-class culture and immigrant culture.

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