

The Use of Oral Testimony in Historical Demography

The Case of Emigration History

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History of the field

In the field of historical methodology, oral history does not have such a 'unique' or 'fashionable' position in Finland as is the case particularly in North America. It is not regarded as a special or even an independent way of obtaining historical information. Rather, it is just one among the many methods and sources available in treating some research problems; there have not been conferences on this topic, for example. In many other parts of the world — including the United States and Canada —, however, the use of oral testimony for historical reconstruction has today become so widespread that one is tempted to describe it as a 'movement'.¹

What this article intends to do is, on the one hand, to give an account of the extent to which oral testimony has been used in Finnish historical research, in particular in migration research, and on the other, to discuss how it can be related to other kinds of source material in research and to methodology.

An empirical approach based on individual interviews took root in Finnish social research in the 1930s, for example in Heikki Waris's research into the social history of the origins of the working-class community in Helsinki, carried out in that period. He combined the treatment of statistical data with information derived from people's subjective experiences; or, to quote Waris himself:²

'...oral recollections from personal history can take the research deeper than can be reached by statistical methods... autobiographical recollection teaches us to understand that inner development which usually cannot be grasped by means of statistical methods...'

¹ Agiri, Babatunde: *Oral Traditions and the Study of the US and Africa*, in: *American Studies International*, Winter 1979, Volume XVII, Number 2. Washington, D.C. 1979, p. 68.

² Waris, Heikki: *Työläisyhteiskunnan syntyminen Helsingin Pitkäsillan pohjoispuolelle*. Helsinki 1932, p. 334; see also Jyrinki, Erkki: *Kysely ja haastattelu tutkimuksessa*. Hämeenlinna 1974, p. 3—4; Virrankoski, Pentti: *Haastattelumenetelmän käyttö historiantutkimuksessa*. Turku 1980, p. 1—2.

Since then, use has been made of recollection in other kinds of historical research, especially in recent political history.³ In social history and demography, a more systematic use of oral testimony did not become established until the 1960s, when a research project into the Finnish overseas migration was initiated at the Department of General History at the University of Turku. This project, aimed at tracing what happened to almost 400 000 Finnish overseas emigrants, from the 1860s to 1930, has so far led to the publication of four doctoral dissertations, around one hundred other research publications, and 40 fairly large MA theses. It has also created an impressive research archive, in which recollection data comprise an important, even if not the most crucial, element.

Concept

In the rest of this article, 'oral history' is taken to cover all research material gathered on the basis of recollection, together with the related methodology. The basic assumption is that the use of oral sources is as permissible as that of any other material.⁴ There is no reason to have to ask whether oral history is a means of gathering historical material, or a distinct research method, or one source among many others.⁵ It is all of these; for once the researcher has decided to use oral testimony as a source in investigating his chosen problem, he has to apply techniques which will draw out the message of his material as efficiently as possible. Then, in the stage when he is marshalling his research, he needs to be able to apply a methodology which will relate the oral testimony to the other research material which has been gathered. Like other forms of historical sources or evidence, oral testimony represents merely the raw materials for use by the historian, and not history in its final form.⁶

The closer we come to the present, the greater becomes the significance of the use of oral testimony. This applies not only to social, but also for instance to political history; for many decisions, together with the factors operating in their background, take place in private consultations; the significance of correspondence is steadily decreasing. The interviewing of individuals in key positions for decisionmaking can then bring out information which it would otherwise be impossible to obtain.

The study of immigration and settlement is a field in which the use of oral testimony to back up and complement other material is particularly appropriate.

³ See Virrankoski 1980, p. 2.

⁴ Vincent, John Martin: *Historical Research. An Outline of Theory and Practice*. New York, N.Y. 1911. Reprinted 1974, p. 142.

⁵ See Sturino, Franc: *Oral History in Ethnic Studies and Implications for Education*, in: *Canadian Oral History Association Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 1979. Ottawa, Ont. 1979, p. 15-16.

⁶ Agiri 1979, p. 68.

Really thorough investigation, in fact, is impossible unless the investigator is able to analyze the motives for the actions of those involved in the migration movement. Naturally, the use of oral testimony involves many dangers, which will be discussed below. In the use of other kinds of material, too, however, the basic assumption in history is that 'there is no such thing as absolute historical truth'.⁷ It is by putting together all the available information that the historical truth is achieved.

As R. G. Collingwood, the British philosopher and historian, says, past action is dead, and without point or meaning, if the historian cannot understand the thinking behind it. Consequently, all history is the history of thought; history is a process of re-thinking. The reconstruction of history in the mind of the researcher is dependent on the empirical evidence, but this reconstruction cannot merely consist of the cataloging of facts. The reality of history only emerges as a result of selection and interpretation.⁸

Operations

Although Collingwood's ideas are open to criticism, they fit in with the theme of this article very well, that is, the use of oral testimony in historical demography and in migration research. Oral history helps us to understand the factors that led to the migrants' decisions to emigrate, etc. Consequently, the University of Turku's Migration History Research Project has addressed its activities to collecting not only other kinds of material, but also oral testimony.

Its recordings of interviews with migrants comprise altogether 170 reels and cassettes. Most of these interviews were carried out in the United States, by researchers from the Department; some were made with return migrants, in Finland. The main information which they contain covers the various stages of the individual migrants' lives: their reasons for emigrating, their life in Finland before departure, what they did abroad, etc. In addition to 'rank and file' migrants, there are also interviews with persons who played an important role in migrant activities, e.g. in the labour movement. The Department has also been fortunate enough to receive donations from Finnish-Americans of tape recordings containing descriptions of migrants' lives.

The Department has not aimed at the systematic collection of tape recordings of oral testimony; these have mainly accumulated as the result of individual research workers' interests. Nevertheless, they do contain an enormous amount of information about the lives of individual people, and the motives for their actions; thus they are not restricted in use to any specific investigation.

With the intention of preserving for posterity oral testimony of the bio-

7 Vansina, Jan: *Oral Tradition. A Study in Historical Methodology*. Translated by H. M. Wright. Aylesbury 1965, p. 185.

8 Collingwood, R. G.: *The Idea of History*. Oxford 1961, p. 9—10.

ographies of as many migrants as possible, the Department organized an extensive questionnaire in North America in 1968. About 20 000 questionnaire forms were sent out, on the basis of the membership files of the Suomi Society in Helsinki; almost 3 000 were completed and returned. The form contained 89 questions for the migrants to answer, and space for free comment. The following year, a similar questionnaire was arranged for return migrants within Finland. Of 7 000 forms sent out, around 1 500 were returned — a satisfactory result, since quite a large proportion of the forms were sent to people in various parts of Finland who were known to be actively involved in the collection of historical tradition; only some of the forms could be sent to return migrants directly.⁹

Migration research had been going on in the Department for so long that it was possible to design the questionnaire forms rather precisely for the purpose in mind, i.e. the answers that were asked for would provide the kind of information that is of general use in migration research. It is of course well known that it is best not to organize questionnaires until the investigator is already very familiar with the topic of research; he will then be able to try to obtain information about all the essential aspects.¹⁰

Thus, when the author of this article began to investigate the return migration, in the early 1970s, he was able to make use of both of these questionnaire collections mentioned above; nonetheless, and despite the fact that the questionnaire addressed to return migrants was drawn up by migration researchers, it was necessary, at a point when the research on return migration was already rather far advanced, to send out an additional questionnaire to return migrants. In the earlier questionnaire, no attention had been paid to the factors affecting migrants' readjustment after their return, nor to the intellectual and material innovations which they had brought with them. This supplementary questionnaire was sent out to about 1 500 people, and 350 were returned.¹¹

The questionnaire material collected by the Department has by now been used in a large number of investigations. Reino Kero's doctoral dissertation on the background factors in the emigration to America from Finland¹² contains a great deal of interview material, as does the dissertation on the factors affecting the return migration.¹³ Olavi Koivukangas also used a lot of oral testimony in his research on the Australian migration.¹⁴ All these studies are

⁹ Reference at the Department of General History, University of Turku: TYYH/S/1/1-2504, 5001—6268.

¹⁰ Compare Vansina 1965, p. 183; Jyrinki 1974, p. 41; Virrankoski 1980, p. 3.

¹¹ Reference: TYYH/S/1/7001—7328.

¹² Kero, Reino: *Migration from Finland to North America in the Years between the United States Civil War and the First World War*. Vammala 1974.

¹³ Virtanen, Keijo: *Settlement or Return: Finnish Emigrants (1860—1930) in the International Overseas Return Migration Movement*. Forssa 1979.

¹⁴ Koivukangas, Olavi: *Scandinavian Immigration and Settlement in Australia before World War II*. Kokkola 1974.

fundamentally works of social history and demography, and the oral testimony is used to fill out the analysis based on statistics and other documentation. The research approach, however, differs considerably among these studies. Oral testimony, mainly in the form of tape recordings of interviews, has also been extensively used in other Finnish studies of migration history, i.e. of migrants' organizations and their activities, such as the studies of the labour movement.

Different kinds of recollection

It is not necessary in this context to go into details about the differences between questionnaires and individual interviews, since these are already widely known. A questionnaire is usually a mass questionnaire, and its purpose is to gather information about collective phenomena from a fairly large group of informants. Compared to individual interviews, it is cheap to operate. Furthermore the questions are the same for all the informants, and are therefore quantifiable. The weakness of this type of postal questionnaire, on the other hand, is that the number of non-respondents is higher than in personal interviews. This non-response, moreover, is not necessarily random, but people belonging to a particular group or type may fail to respond relatively more frequently than members of another group.¹⁵

The advantage of the individual interview is that in this way information can be obtained from carefully selected individuals. This too may be collective in nature; more typically, however, the informants are selected on the basis of their special knowledge. This is a flexible method, since the interviewer can elaborate on the question where necessary, and thus reduce the non-response rate. The questions can also be put in the order preferred by the researcher. Furthermore, the interviewer can operate as an observer and controller of the interview situation. The presence of the interviewer, on the other hand, may be a disadvantage: for he may attempt to influence the informant's attitudes, in order to obtain support for his own hypotheses. The personal interview is also considerably more expensive to operate than the postal questionnaire; and if the interviews are carried out by a large number of people, and are free in form, their comparison is difficult.¹⁶

Example: study of return migration

The advantages and disadvantages of these different means of gathering information need to be taken into account in historical demography and migration research. The investigator will need to come to his own decision as to

¹⁵ Jyrinki 1974, p. 25—27; Virrankoski 1980, p. 3—5.

¹⁶ Jyrinki 1974, p. 11—16; Virrankoski 1980, p. 5—13.

which method is more appropriate to the questions he is investigating. It may be necessary to use both personal interview and questionnaire in the same investigation; this was what happened in the author's study on the return migration. We shall now therefore discuss in this context the methodology of this work, since these research methods can probably be applied in other researches in social history and demography as well.

The approach in research into the return or non-return of migrants is basically demographic: the strength of the migration movement, variation in this over time, and its composition, can best be established by means of statistical material. Behind these data, however, are the individual factors, starting from the migrants' motives for setting out, and finishing with their decision to return and their readjustment to their former home.

The scientific value of oral testimony in investigating abstract matters with the help of mass questionnaires — such as migrants' motives — has been regarded as virtually zero.¹⁷ But, on the other hand, who better could ask about the motives for some activity than those involved? If a long time has elapsed between the events and the investigation, there are of course many dangers, but the investigator must take these into account in his critique, and also make use of any other material that may exist.

The questionnaire archive on return migrants was a particularly good source of material, for example for the analysis of migrants' motives for returning. This was then backed up with documentary information, while there was also information available from a questionnaire sent out to municipalities in Finland in 1918 by the Migration Committee.¹⁸ Despite the interval of almost 50 years between these questionnaires, the findings were largely similar. This was also true of the investigation of returning migrants' readjustment following their return, and of the innovations they brought with them.

The large number of the questionnaire forms made it possible to quantify the results, with the result that it was possible to draw general conclusions about the oral testimony. It must of course be borne in mind that in gathering research material from migrants many decades after the events concerned, the questionnaire cannot be carried out on a proper sample basis, as would be the case in the social science investigation of a contemporary phenomenon. One has to try to gather, and utilize, all the available information. Consequently the material may be skewed, and one has therefore to be extremely cautious in looking for general trends. Finally, it must always be borne in mind that in history, the individual is a member of a community, but that the community is nevertheless not simply the sum of the individuals.¹⁹

¹⁷ Virrankoski 1980, p. 4.

¹⁸ Siirtolaisuuskomitean (1918) mietintö. Helsinki 1924, p. 1; Suomen siirtolaisuusolot. Siirtolaisuuskomitean alotteesta toimeenpannun tiedustelun tulokset. n.p., n.d., passim.

¹⁹ Vincent 1911, p. 278—279.

The way personal interviews were used in the research on return migration was basically to provide supporting examples for statistical analysis, and to present typical cases. For example, on the basis of an analysis of various different types of source material, the author came to the conclusion that most of the migrants had only intended to remain abroad for a few years, despite the fact that in the end only a fifth of them returned permanently. The motives for setting out are thus extremely well illustrated by the following quotation from an interview: 'I intended to remain abroad until I had a pocketful of money.'²⁰ The following quotation, on the other hand, crystallizes (somewhat crudely, perhaps) the finding that emerges from investigating what different sources indicate about the impact of the return migration:²¹

'Those American or Canadian emigrants who were working in the forests, or other kinds of casual work, had very limited opportunities to participate in social, political, or cultural activities, so I don't think they had anything to offer in these fields. They might have new ideas to do with the economy, though.'

Oral testimony thus had a double significance for this research. The questionnaire provided basic material in investigating specific questions, and made the quantification of the results possible. Personal interviews, on the other hand, complemented the statistical treatment, and made it come alive.

Dangers

The weaknesses of oral testimony have been very fully discussed in various studies, in terms both of history and of the social sciences. Naturally, one must agree that oral testimony as such is unreliable. The human memory has its limitations, and the informant's understanding and interpretation may have been faulty from the beginning. Oral testimony, recollection, is also very subjective.²² It has been doubted in the social sciences — to say nothing of history — whether interview methods are capable of generating reliable generalizations. Some have even alleged 'questionnaire mania', in which everything is subjected to investigation by questionnaire even when better methods are also available.²³ Of the research findings published in the *American Sociological Review* in 1962—69, 90 % were based on questionnaires, and interviews, and only 10 % on other kinds of material.²⁴

²⁰ Reference: TYYH/S/1/7180.

²¹ Reference: TYYH/S/1/7234.

²² Virrankoski 1980, p. 13—15.

²³ Jyrinki 1974, p. 132—138.

²⁴ Phillips, D., *Knowledge from What? Theories and Methods in Social Research*. Chicago 1971, p. 3.

This is not the case in history, of course, nor in migration history, where the role of oral testimony is to be one source among others in solving the questions under investigation. The limitations of oral testimony are real; but then so are those of other types of source, too. The use of oral testimony imposes heavy demands on the ability and critical sense of the investigator, but on the other hand it allows him to obtain information without which his research would only be half-complete. We can thus concur with the view mentioned at the beginning, which Heikki Waris stated in the 1930s.

Contributions

It is, for example, the use of oral testimony which has largely contributed to one very valuable finding, i.e. that the migrants actually belonged to three different communities: (1) to the emigrant world, dominated by the language of the mother country and ethnically-based activities; (2) to the host country, to which with the passage of the decades and through his children's intermeditation he gradually came closer; and (3) to the old country, which he could never forget. It was only death which finally terminated the Finnishness of Finnish emigrants, even if they had not seen their mother country for decades. This is all the more important because assimilation research, which has been in the hands of researchers from the host countries, has treated the migrant as something static: he has been seen as being ready, on arrival in the new country, to settle permanently. To put this another way, the motives for emigration, and the background, have not been integrated into assimilation research.²⁵ The majority of migrants, however, did not even attempt to assimilate in the first years after their arrival, but merely to make themselves reasonably comfortable; for their intention had merely been to 'commute to work', so to speak, and then return home. These observations offer an extra dimension to the study of immigration and settlement.

All in all, therefore, oral testimony is an appropriate source for use in migration history — and historical demography in general —, even if migration history is seen as an extension of social science. Oral history has there a limited, though in many cases fruitful use. It helps us to perceive and understand this enormous movement of people, and the individuals who compose it. After all, behind the statistically measurable mass phenomenon there is always the individual, with his actions and decisions. If history is seen from the point of view of the individual, or as a form of art, then oral history may even take on a very dominating position as a historical source and method.

²⁵ See Virtanen, Keijo: Siirtolaisten sopeutuminen uuteen yhteiskuntaan, in: *Historiallinen Aikakauskirja* N:o 1, 1980. Forssa 1980, passim; see also Harney, Robert F.: *Oral Testimony and Ethnic Studies*, in: *Polyphony. The Bulletin of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario*, Summer 1978, Vol. 1, No. 2. Toronto, Ont. 1978, p. 44.

Moreover, the collection of oral testimony from migrants comprises as such a cultural undertaking whose significance cannot be overstated. We need to gather as much of this material as we can, while it is still possible. It will be an important source of material for future generations of researchers, who — with the lengthening historical perspective — may be able to perceive the migration phenomenon more clearly than we can, provided that we create the facilities for them to use this material when they themselves will no longer have access to it.

The Research Institute of Finnish Affairs and Health Services, which was set up to coordinate the work of the research group on the arrangement of the experiment. On September 14, 1977, a meeting was held in the premises of the Institute. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the arrangements for the experiment and to decide on the subjects to be investigated. The following statistical indicators illustrate these social changes: the portion of the labour force engaged in agriculture and forestry has decreased from 38% in 1960 to 15% in 1975; the corresponding portion for the service sector has increased from 24% in 1960 to 54% in 1975; the portion of the population living in the cities has increased from 38% in 1960 to 60% in 1980; in 1980 55% of all university level students were women; the portion of women who have entered the labour market increased from 41% in 1960 to 63% in 1975. The high educational level of Finnish women is a motivating factor for them to enter the labour market. The supply of day care facilities, however, has not met the demand. As a consequence, young couples choose not to have children or at least not more than one or two children. At the beginning of the 1970's the birth rate in Finland was one of the lowest ones in Europe. Population statistics showed a decrease in the population of the country. In Finland, the municipalities take care of the arrangement of the day care of children. Only about one fourth of all pre-school aged children can be taken into state-subsidized day care, as represented by day care nurseries and organized children's day care in families. As a consequence, in the past it has been suggested that the day care of children should be subsidized in order for families to have a greater range of alternatives in arranging the day care of their children.

The experiment and the goals

In Finland, maternity pay as a family policy subsidy form received increasing attention during the 1960's when the term-subsidized care at home - related to the social welfare assistance or increased child allowances