

# Only After Death Do Us Part?

## Contemporary Biography, Oral History, and Writing about Living People Today

Jana WOHLMUTH MARKUPOVÁ

This essay explores the area of contemporary biography, i.e., biographical research about living people conducted in the field of historical sciences. A special emphasis is put on oral history and its use in selected biographies, older and recent, which serve as examples of several specificities of this approach. Furthermore, the author finds two ideal-typical roles that the main protagonist may play in this type of biographical writing, both participative, with the first being relatively “silent” and the second more “vocal.” The essay touches on problems such as negotiating the roles of the researchers and the research subject, authorization, research ethics, current legislation, and the pros and cons of this approach. More broadly, this article aims to widen the range of theoretical and methodological discussion in the field of biography studies. It also illustrates that contemporary oral history-based biographies have a long tradition from which we may draw on for our future projects.

**Keywords:** contemporary biography, oral history, biographical research, contemporary history, methodology

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**DOI:** 10.14712/24645370.4999



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## Introduction

In June 2024, one of the participants of our biographical workshop<sup>1</sup> introduced her research by saying, “In my thesis, I want to write about

<sup>1</sup> The workshop, titled “Biographical Research in Central and Eastern Europe: Traditions and Challenges,” took place at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, in Prague, from June 3 to 4, 2024.

my family member, who is still alive; therefore, I am already doing the two worst things a biographer can supposedly do.” It was received with humor, but this stance is relatively widespread among biographers. The reluctance is usually motivated by an implicit fear of losing authorial independence and research freedom. Given how controversial this is on the one hand and still so appealing on the other, this essay explores the phenomenon and problems that come with *contemporary biography*.<sup>2</sup>

The term itself has several connotations. Outside academia, it may be used to describe “contemporary biographical writing” or even “recent biographies” without specifying the period in which the researched subject lived. In this essay, though, the term *contemporary biography* will refer to a result of biographical research conducted within historical studies, which focuses on a still-living person. As such, the term resembles *contemporary history*, that is, “recent” history experienced and remembered by people living today, currently defined as the period from circa 1945 until the “present.”<sup>3</sup> Through the definition of a historical period based on its living witnesses, another specific aspect of contemporary history naturally comes to mind: it is the only historical period that can be researched with the help of oral history.<sup>4</sup> This may also be why *contemporary biography*, in the aforementioned sense, is especially often conceptualized within oral history circles, which is not surprising if we realize that biography and oral history have actually gone hand in hand since oral history emerged.

Therefore, this essay presents selected examples from the history of encounters between biographical writing and oral history in the field of contemporary biography.<sup>5</sup> It shows dominant approaches and historical as well as recent theoretical, epistemological, and methodological ques-

<sup>2</sup> Conducting research within the author’s own family circles will not be the primary focus of this essay.

<sup>3</sup> ALEIDA ASSMANN, *History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony*, *Poetics Today* 2/27 (2006), p. 271; TOMÁŠ VILÍMEK, *Specifika soudobých dějin*, in: *Základní problémy studia moderních a soudobých dějin*, Jana Čechurová, Jan Randák et al., Prague 2014, pp. 165–166.

<sup>4</sup> I understand that in the near future, we will be able to research older periods through already conducted and preserved oral history sources, but we usually actively record oral history interviews only within contemporary history.

<sup>5</sup> This essay does not address the biographies of living subjects who do not, in any way, participate in the research or those who do not express their agreement with its realization.

tions that have emerged from these encounters. In doing so, it poses two ideal-typical types for the merging of oral history and biography.

## Biography and Oral History

Oral history “[...] is a practice, a method of research. It is the act of recording the speech of people with something interesting to say and then analysing their memories of the past.”<sup>6</sup> The discipline focuses on historical events, processes, or periods as well as particular people and their lives.<sup>7</sup> It originated in the 1930s and 1940s in the United States and gained wider attention after WWII due to not only far-reaching experiences of trauma but also thanks to the development of recording devices and their gradual increase in accessibility.<sup>8</sup> Since then, the method has further evolved within historical studies and the humanities and social sciences in general.<sup>9</sup>

Biographical research and oral history developed in the first decades in parallel; the founder of the first oral history research center in the world, the Columbia University Center for Oral History Research (founded in 1948), Allan Nevins, had already published several biographies in which he used oral history interviews.<sup>10</sup> However, in his approach – especially in his best-known biography of Henry Ford – he used oral history mainly as a *décor* to paraphrase Hans Renders, making only

<sup>6</sup> LYNN ABRAMS, *Oral history theory*, London 2016, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> MIROSLAV VANĚK, PAVEL MÜCKE, *Třetí strana trojúhelníku: teorie a praxe orální historie*, Prague 2022, p. 18. Oral history projects may have different forms, with the two main aspects being thematic and biographical, as I tried to analyze here: JANA WOHLMUTH MARKUPOVÁ, *Orální historie v biografickém a tematickém výzkumu: dva ideálně-typické výzkumné přístupy a jejich specifika*, MEMO 1/2024, pp. 60–79. In this essay, I shall focus solely on the biographical approach.

<sup>8</sup> The idea of oral history is, of course, much older, but as an “organized activity” it dates to these decades. LOUIS STARR, *Oral History*, in: *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, (edd.) David King Dunaway, Willa K. Baum, Walnut Creek 1996, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> M. VANĚK, P. MÜCKE, *Třetí strana trojúhelníku*, pp. 45–46.

<sup>10</sup> ALLAN NEVINS, *John D. Rockefeller: The Heroic Age of American Enterprise*, New York 1940; ALLAN NEVINS, FRANK ERNEST HILL, *Ford: The Times, the Man, the Company*, New York 1954; SHELLEY TROWER, *Auto/biographical oral histories, from ‘oral memoirs’ to ‘The Life of Nate Shaw’ (1948–1974)*, *Oral History* 45/2017, no. 1, p. 44.

very limited use of its interpretative potential.<sup>11</sup> In the next decade, the 1950s, Nevins was followed by, for example, Forrest Pogue, who dedicated his work to George C. Marshall, whom he “persuaded” to give interviews, which he used in his four-volume biography published after Marshall died in 1959.<sup>12</sup>

The 1970s and 1980s were characterized by a *post-positivist* or *cultural turn* in oral history, as stated by Alistair Thomson, meaning that oral historians started looking not only for *facts* in their recorded interviews but, more importantly, for *meanings and representations*.<sup>13</sup> At this time, oral history also became influenced by (historical) anthropology and microhistory and gained new theoretical and epistemological impulses. Among others, several interpretative biographical works were finished and published around this time, which drew primarily from oral history and archival sources. Their authors enriched the theoretical discussion on the topic of biography and oral history, demonstrating the major potential of their parallel use.<sup>14</sup> These 1970s and 1980s biographies also mark a broadening of chosen historical subjects from (not only) “white elite men” to “ordinary people” or even the “anti-elitist.”<sup>15</sup>

Given developments in the earlier decades – not only in oral history but the general *biographical turn* in humanities as well<sup>16</sup> – it is understandable why the 1990s symbolized a conjuncture of interest in biography in oral history circles too. We can see that, for example, in one of

<sup>11</sup> JANA WOHLMUTH MARKUPOVÁ, *Biography is with its one leg in the academia and with the other in the public arena.* “Interview with Professor Hans Renders about the crossroads of historical biography, oral history, and microhistory, *Dějiny – teorie – kritika* 20/2023, no. 2, p. 161, <https://doi.org/10.14712/24645370.3200>, PETR WOHLMUTH, *Tri dialogy. Úvod do teorie a praxe postpozitivistické orální historie*, in: *Vojáci věčné války. Militární reenactment v českých zemích mezi historickou rekonstrukcí a nevyřízenými úcty dějin*, (ed.) Petr Wohlmuth, Prague 2024, p. 52.

<sup>12</sup> DONALD A. RITCHIE, *Doing Oral History*, New York 2015, p. 119.

<sup>13</sup> ALISTAIR THOMSON, *Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History*, *The Oral History Review* 34/2007, no. 1, pp. 54–57.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, THEODORE ROSENGARTEN, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*, New York 1974; ROBERT A. CARO, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*, New York 1975; MILTON MELTZER, *Dorothea Lange: A Photographer's Life*, New York 1978; DAVID KING DUNAWAY, *How Can I Keep from Singing: Pete Seeger*, New York 1981; DAVID J. MITCHELL, *W.A.C. Bennett and the rise of British Columbia*, Vancouver 1983.

<sup>15</sup> S. TROWER, *Auto/Biographical Oral Histories*, p. 45.

<sup>16</sup> VÁCLAV SIXTA, *Možnosti historické biografie: teorie biografie a historická věda*, Prague 2023, pp. 18–27.

the best-known oral history journals, *The Oral History Review*. In 1990, Linda Shopes edited a book review symposium called *Oral History and Biography*, where six other reviewers were asked to review several biographies that used oral history and evaluate the method's use, value, and potential specifics.<sup>17</sup> One of the main topics was the "retrospective" nature of an oral history interview and intersubjectivity in oral history, i.e., the relationship between the narrator and interviewer. Again, some reviewers emphasized that oral history may be a useful method to capture the perspective of a historical actor – albeit in retrospect.<sup>18</sup> Donald A. Ritchie also raised the question of the "second-generation" use of oral history, that is, the use of interviews conducted earlier as a part of another project.<sup>19</sup> Beyond this, the reviews were limited in their reflection and did not bring a much deeper understanding of the theory of using oral history in biographical research.

This changed later in the 1990s and 2000s with the first theoretical reflections on biographical research based (not only) on oral history, including those by authors such as David King Dunaway, Andrew McFadzean, and Valerie Raleigh Yow. Dunaway drew from his experience writing his biography of an American songwriter, musician, and activist, Pete Seeger. McFadzean, on the other hand, specialized in political biography and wrote about Robert Bowie, an American diplomat and university professor. Finally, Yow reflected on her biographical research on two American female writers, Betty Smith and Bernice Kelly Harris.<sup>20</sup> While Yow and McFadzean provided theoretical and

<sup>17</sup> LINDA SHOPES, *Introduction*, *The Oral History Review* 18/1990, no. 1, pp. 93–94.

<sup>18</sup> JAMES E. FOGERTY, *Review of Southern Timberman: The Legacy of William Buchanan*, by A. H. Mayor, *The Oral History Review* 18/1990, no. 1, pp. 94–95; DONALD A. RITCHIE, *Review of George C. Marshall: Soldier-Statesman of the American Century*; *Harry S. Truman: Fair Dealer & Cold Warrior*, by M. A. Stoler & W. E. Pemberton, *The Oral History Review* 18/1990, no. 1, p. 97.

<sup>19</sup> D. A. RITCHIE, *Review*, p. 97. It is noteworthy that Ritchie had his own experience with "second-generation research" while writing his dissertation about James M. Landis, an American government official and a dean of Harvard Law School. D. A. RITCHIE, *Doing Oral History*, p. 34; DONALD A. RITCHIE, *James M. Landis, Dean of the Regulators*, Cambridge 1980.

<sup>20</sup> D. K. DUNAWAY, *How Can I Keep from Singing: Pete Seeger*; ANDREW MCFADZEAN, *"I Think He Is a Very Clever Man with Words": An Intellectual Biography of Robert Richardson Bowie, 1909–: Washington Policy Planner and Harvard Academic*, Sydney 1996 (diss.); VALERIE RALEIGH YOW, *Bernice Kelly Harris: A Good Life Was Writing*, Baton Rouge 1999; VALERIE RALEIGH YOW, *Betty*

methodological remarks (and Yow wrote the first “how to” texts on this topic), Dunaway proposed two important typologies which frame this essay.

The first typology is based on the period in which the main protagonist lived and what sources are available; this is also where the definition of *contemporary biography* that I use comes from. According to Dunaway, the first type is *historical biography*, which focuses on “figures deep in the historical past about whom present-day, first-hand accounts are impossible.”<sup>21</sup> The second type is what he calls *after-the-fact biography* – or a *belated biography* – which focuses on a person who died 50–5 years ago. A researcher can record interviews for this type of project, but only with other people who knew the main protagonist, or use interviews which were recorded by someone else (second-generation use of oral history, as Ritchie would call it). Finally, the third type is called *contemporary biography*, which conducts biographical research about a living person.<sup>22</sup> Should the main protagonist of such research also provide oral history interviews for the project, Dunaway calls it the *contemporary oral biography*, and he adds: “From the writer’s point of view, the contemporary oral biography is fraught with difficulties – jealous contemporaries, eager to supply or suppress information unless the biographer can get there first. Live subjects aren’t always the last word on their own life; and they can hound or sue.”<sup>23</sup> The second typology is based on the use of oral history sources and differentiates among *the orally sourced biography*, *a group memoir*, and *oral memoir*.<sup>24</sup> In this study, though, I shall omit

*Smith: A Life of the Author of a Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Chapel Hill 2008; For the period of the 2000s, we may also mention DANIEL JAMES, *Doña María’s Story: Life History, Memory, and Political Identity*, Durham 2000. However, I agree with Penny Summerfield, who wrote: “The book about her that he [Daniel James] subsequently published is not a biography, although it includes many biographical details. Rather, he uses Doña María’s life story as a vehicle through which to explore the characteristics and contradictions of working-class women’s lives in this community.” PENNY SUMMERFIELD, *Histories of the self: personal narratives and historical practice*, Boca Raton 2018, p. 107. To keep the argumentation clear, I shall refrain from analyzing these nuances and stick only to explicit biographies.

<sup>21</sup> DAVID KING DUNAWAY, *The Oral Biography*, Biography 14/1991, no. 3, p. 257. He was inspired by Anthony Alpers, who proposed a similar typology in the *Times Literary Supplement*.

<sup>22</sup> D. K. DUNAWAY, *The Oral Biography*, p. 257.

<sup>23</sup> D. K. DUNAWAY, *The Oral Biography*, p. 258.

<sup>24</sup> D. K. DUNAWAY, *The Oral Biography*, pp. 256–257.

the last two, as we would consider them sources rather than products of historical research.

In 2005 and 2006, another term emerged, which is *oral history-based biography*, that was used, apart from other cases, in a captivating public discussion within the pages, again, of *The Oral History Review*. There, four authors debated two concrete biographies in the context of American contemporary history. The discussants were Sandy Polishuk, author of a biography of Julia Ruuttila, a labor journalist and activist; Catherine Fosl, who wrote about Anne Braden, anti-racist activist; Deborah A. Gershenowitz, editor of both books; and finally Kathryn L. Nasstrom, a historian and a biographer herself.

In this debate, the authors discussed various problems during or after their research. In the first case, Polishuk described how she discovered only after her subject passed away that she must have purposely told her, in some cases, rather fictional stories, and Polishuk managed to analyze them thoroughly in her book.<sup>25</sup> In the second case, Fosl described her complicated and ever-changing relationship with her subject, who, on top of that, passed away in the middle of the printed debate. The main topics of her contribution to the discussion were the role of the narrator in creating the final manuscript, its key topics (e.g., Braden refused to answer whether she was a member of the Communist Party, which played a huge role in her life, especially in the era of McCarthyism – and the author did not cover that aspect of her life in her biography of the activist), and later, how Fosl might have decided differently were her protagonist already deceased.<sup>26</sup> Gershenowitz offered her unique editor's experience as a "detached outsider that intrudes on a very intimate relationship [between the author and the subject]."<sup>27</sup> Lastly, Nasstrom pointed out that although the narrator's wishes must be respected due to research ethics, "nevertheless [by excluding some topics], we've lost something," and

<sup>25</sup> SANDY POLISHUK, *Secrets, Lies, and Misremembering: Take II*, *The Oral History Review* 32/2005, no. 2, pp. 51–58.

<sup>26</sup> CATHERINE FOSL, *When Subjects Talk Back: Writing Anne Braden's Life-In-Progress*, *The Oral History Review* 32/2005, no. 2, pp. 59–69; CATHERINE FOSL, *Response to Commentary*, *The Oral History Review* 2/33 (2006), p. 102.

<sup>27</sup> DEBORAH A. GERSHENOWITZ, *Negotiating Voices: Biography and the Curious Triangle Between Subject, Author, and Editor*, *The Oral History Review* 32/2005, no. 2, p. 72.

called for future innovative approaches within oral history-based biographies and especially “pushing boundaries.”<sup>28</sup>

As we have seen, biography and oral history have been connected for decades, producing not only many books but especially several relevant theoretical and methodological reflections. In the following parts, this essay presents selected issues regarding this type of writing, differentiates between ways in which the main biographical protagonist may be involved in the biographer’s research, and considers the key recent ethical challenges concerning this type of research.

## Including the Main Protagonist in Research

Whether or not to include the main biographical protagonist of the research *in* one’s research is naturally, in the first place, connected to the sole fact of whether it is *possible*. Is the person still alive, and is his or her health condition good enough? Do they want to be included? And if so, do we as researchers want to include them in the process? What are the benefits and risks in doing so?

Although, from the previous paragraphs, it may seem that all aforementioned oral historians had a rather pleasant and successful experience with including the main protagonist of their works in their research, it is not so simple. It was their awareness that we can now build on, but this knowledge is not based only on contemporary oral biography research. Yes, Dunaway conducted tens of interviews with Pete Seeger and around a hundred with others, and he published his book when Seeger was still alive and well. So did biographers McFadzean, or even Robert Caro. On the other hand, Yow started writing about the two authors who were already deceased, so she – in Dunaway’s words – wrote a *belated*, not a *contemporary biography*. The same applies to a number of reviewed biographies in *The Oral History Review* from 1990, or even Polishuk’s book about Ruuttila.

In this sense, we can see only a higher, not necessarily absolute, willingness of historians who explicitly state that besides other methods they also use oral history, to use the method in this type of research. From this point of view, they do not differ much from biographers, who are

<sup>28</sup> KATHRYN L. NASSTROM, *Pushing Boundaries in Oral History–Based Biographies*, *The Oral History Review* 32/2005, no. 2, pp. 80–81.



inclined to write after-the-fact biographies and conduct interviews with interviewees other than the main protagonist but do not identify their methodology with oral history.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, their research, therefore, partly or fully “remains” in the period of contemporary history but without the main protagonist having any possible power to control it. It is still, especially in oral history circles, where this question is discussed the most, which is why this essay sticks to this field of expertise. Even though oral historians are most aware of the risks involved in including living protagonists of biography in their research, what benefits do they find in doing so?

Although the research conditions have been constantly evolving, the answer to this question has remained largely consistent. The main benefit of including protagonists lies in gaining access to sources such as the subject’s private archive, their friends, family, and colleagues, and, perhaps most importantly, their actor’s—or emic—own perspective accessed through oral history interviews.

This argument was present in scholarly discussions from the beginning: in 1931, Nevins, who was working on his biography of former U.S. president Grover Cleveland, lamented that “no one had had the wit to interview Cleveland or his associates, most of whom died without leaving historians a legacy of any kind.”<sup>30</sup> In the 1970s, when Milton Meltzer began his work on a biography of American photographer, Dorothea Lange, he found that only “a few letters of hers survived and that she kept no diary or journal.”<sup>31</sup> Subsequently, he discovered oral history interviews, which were recorded with her before she passed away, and later recorded many more with her associates and her husband.<sup>32</sup> Another two decades later, when McFadzean wrote about Bowie, oral history became almost a substitute for non-existing “private papers” that would help him “create the sense of the person.”<sup>33</sup> Later, McFadzean

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, PAVEL KLUSÁK, *Gott: československý příběh*, Brno 2021.

<sup>30</sup> L. STARR, *Oral History*, p. 44. The fact that Nevins referred to oral history interviews as “oral autobiographies” and narrators as “autobiographers” is telling, too. ALLAN NEVINS, *Oral History: How and Why It Was Born*, in: *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, (edd.) David King Dunaway, Willa K. Baum, Walnut Creek 1996, pp. 29, 38.

<sup>31</sup> MILTON MELTZER, *Using Oral History: A Biographer’s Point of View*, *The Oral History Review* 7/1979, p. 42

<sup>32</sup> M. MELTZER, *Using Oral History: A Biographer’s Point of View*, pp. 44–45.

<sup>33</sup> A. MCFADZEAN, *“I Think He Is a Very Clever Man with Words”*, p. v.

elevated his argument further, as interviews revealed even what was not present in Bowie's ego-documents, such as his private networks.<sup>34</sup> With that, Yow would be in agreement because, according to her, oral history may communicate self-reflections, "motivations, feelings and meanings" and allows the researcher to "ask such questions of the subject."<sup>35</sup>

This kind of subjective self-reflection, which can be communicated via oral history, i.e., the ability of oral history to capture an emic perspective or simply the perspective of a historical actor, was therefore seen as its main value in biographical research, especially if the protagonist did not collect or leave any (or many) ego-documents.<sup>36</sup> For Glen Jeansonne, oral history was "an essential tool for researching biographies of twentieth-century figures, for whom crucial written records are extremely limited."<sup>37</sup> David J. Mitchell even went so far—paraphrasing the nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet—to call oral history "a living document."<sup>38</sup>

Some also saw its benefits in drawing the researcher's attention to other possible sources (archival or oral) or eventually having access to them directly. Fosl spent weeks "cleaning out Anne's [her subject's] attic and hauling most of its contents (23 file boxes) back to my home in Virginia. She trusted me with that task."<sup>39</sup> Others appreciate that this collaboration may provide an understanding of what topics the biographed person found important in their own life. As McFadzean would put it, the interviews provided "a map on which the research [...] was initially based. [...] As the biographer, my understanding of Robert Bowie the person was essential to this biography, and the interviews proved highly successful. [...] He provided a personal tour through his life which greatly assisted my search for Robert Bowie, the historical figure."<sup>40</sup>

From "drawing a map," though, there may be only one small step to the main protagonist having control over the biographer's entire research project or having a larger role than initially intended. This is why I now

<sup>34</sup> A. MCFADZEAN, "I Think He Is a Very Clever Man with Words", p. 41.

<sup>35</sup> V. R. YOW, *Recording oral history*, p. 220.

<sup>36</sup> M. MELTZER, *Using Oral History: A Biographer's Point of View*, p. 42.

<sup>37</sup> GLEN JEANSONNE, *Oral History, Biography, and Political Demagoguery: The Case of Gerald L. K. Smith*, *The Oral History Review* 11/1983, no. 1, p. 87.

<sup>38</sup> DAVID J. MITCHELL, 'Living Documents': *Oral History and Biography*, *Biography* 3/1980, no. 4, pp. 284–285.

<sup>39</sup> C. FOSL, *When Subjects Talk Back*, p. 64.

<sup>40</sup> A. MCFADZEAN, *Interviews With Robert Bowie*, p. 45.

discuss each scenario closely and with regard to ideal-typical ways in which the main protagonist may participate in our biographical research, i.e., either “silently” or more “vocally” as an active narrator of his or her life story.

### 1. “Silent” Subjects

The first form of collaboration with the main protagonist is characterized by their indirect involvement with it, albeit they may still play a significant role in the research. An optimal example from recent years is the latest monograph by Přemysl Houda, who wrote about Czech songwriter and musician – and, for some, a controversial public figure due to his collaboration with the communist secret police in the 1980s – Jaromír Nohavica.<sup>41</sup>

In this research, Nohavica allowed Houda to work with his private collections and helped him contact other narrators close to him at various times and in various environments. In this sense, the main protagonist played the role of a *gatekeeper*. However, Nohavica himself – from an oral history point of view – remained *silent*, stating that he had “already said everything a hundred times.”<sup>42</sup> He did not want to grant Houda any interview, and from the beginning, their “unwritten agreement” said that Nohavica did not want to have any control over Houda’s research. The question of authorization did not even come up. The work on the book lasted about four years, and Houda estimated that he might have met Nohavica only occasionally, in total, for an hour or two.<sup>43</sup> Although Nohavica read the book before it was published, it was Houda’s initiative, eventually, and Nohavica did not demand any changes.<sup>44</sup>

Houda also conducted thorough archival research and recorded tens of interviews with all kinds of narrators.<sup>45</sup> This research setting allowed

<sup>41</sup> PŘEMYSL HOUDA, *Nohavica a jeho naše malá válka*, Prague 2023.

<sup>42</sup> P. HOUDA, *Nohavica a jeho naše malá válka*, p. 16.

<sup>43</sup> YOUTUBE: CENTRUM PANT MEDIA, *Jaromír Nohavica a (jeho) naše malá válka*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gi3A4rEGF94&t=915s> (accessed on 1 February 2025).

<sup>44</sup> P. HOUDA, *Nohavica a jeho naše malá válka*, p. 17. YOUTUBE: CENTRUM PANT MEDIA, *Jaromír Nohavica a (jeho) naše malá válka*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gi3A4rEGF94&t=915s> (accessed on 1 February 2025).

<sup>45</sup> P. HOUDA, *Nohavica a jeho naše malá válka*, p. 20.

him to focus not only on the main protagonist but also on *representations* of him, especially in the public sphere.<sup>46</sup> His approach, therefore, resembles that of Marcus O'Dair, who described his research on Robert Wyatt, an English musician, which I will introduce in the next section as a “polyphonic biography.”<sup>47</sup>

Although this kind of biography remains biographical in nature, the “silent” approach weakens, in my opinion, the potential of including the emic perspective of the main protagonist as a historical actor.<sup>48</sup> Although in the cited case, it was the protagonist's, not the author's, choice, and as such, it must be respected; should the opposite occur, any author – at least one that has something to do with oral history, given they decided to write about a living person in the first place – would probably not object.

In this regard, this situation is rare from the perspective of research ethics, too. As we shall see, oral history research is regulated mainly in terms of collaboration with the narrators, i.e., the living participants in the research. However, should the main protagonist “only” provide the researcher with private documents, we find ourselves in a rather grey or unregulated area if these documents are not intended to be archived in an official archive, where the procedure is already institutionalized and regulated by law. What is also noteworthy is the fact that by not participating in oral history research, the biographer is not expected to negotiate over informed consent with the main protagonist, and, paradoxically, the whole collaboration is then based on *bona fide*, even more so than in the following type of biography, where the main protagonist is present more explicitly.

## 2. Vocal, “Talking” Narrators

Regarding this type of involvement of the main protagonist, we now discuss what oral historians call *contemporary oral* (*orally sourced or oral history-based*) *biography*. In his article from the early 1990s, Dunaway added

<sup>46</sup> P. HOUDA, *Nohavica a jeho naše malá válka*, pp. 17–18.

<sup>47</sup> MARCUS O'DAIR, *Pacts, paratext and polyphony: writing the authorised biography of Robert Wyatt*, *Life Writing* 16/2019, no. 2, p. 286.

<sup>48</sup> JAN HORSKÝ, *Historický aktér*, in: Lucie Storchová et al., *Koncepty a dějiny: proměny pojmů v současné historické vědě*, Prague 2014, pp. 95–101.

that this type is “fraught with difficulties [because] live subjects [...] can hound or sue.”<sup>49</sup> Following his last remark, I try to show the fragile and, at the same time, very fruitful nature of this research.

However, by this type of biography I do not mean a solely *oral biography* as introduced, for example, by William L. Gibson, which would appear as a collection of interviews with commentaries.<sup>50</sup> I mean the results of biographical research, usually conducted in the field of historical studies, which uses various types of historical sources, including oral history. In this case, oral history is not the sole or main research method, but usually one of the main ones; nevertheless, given the specific nature of doing oral history with the main protagonist, I believe this part of the research deserves special attention.

Generally, this approach's key characteristic is the main narrator's more active and visible involvement than in the first case. The protagonist/main narrator usually gives oral history interviews and may also help by finding other possible narrators for the biography, but not necessarily. While recording and meeting repeatedly, the researcher also gains better access to the protagonist's potential private archive and can discover other sources for their research. Good examples where the main protagonist not only provided oral history interviews (as a *narrator*), but also helped the researcher to find other potential sources and narrators – and thus became a *gatekeeper* like Nohavica in the first type of research –, are McFadzean's aforementioned biography of Robert Bowie, O'Dair's biography of Robert Wyatt, and Fosl's book about Braden.<sup>51</sup> First, let's look into what the collaboration looked like from a practical perspective.

Catherine Fosl spent, in total, thirteen years writing her book, recorded ten oral history interviews with her subject in seven years, worked with

<sup>49</sup> D. K. DUNAWAY, *The Oral Biography*, p. 258.

<sup>50</sup> Gibson characterized this type of work as follows: “[...] the subject's life appears not as a compilation of ‘objective’ facts, but only as it is revealed in a series of subjective interviews with family and friends.” WILLIAM L. GIBSON, *Review of Four Samples of Oral Biography*, by David King Dunaway, Gary Fountain, Peter Brazeau, Sam Halpert, Sally Wolff, and Floyd C. Watkins, *The Oral History Review* 24/1997, no. 2, p. 101.

<sup>51</sup> A. MCFADZEAN, “*I Think He Is a Very Clever Man with Words*”; MARCUS O'DAIR, *Different Every Time: The Authorised Biography of Robert Wyatt*, Berkeley 2015; CATHERINE FOSL, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South*, New York 2002. Many more biographies used interviews, but here I focus only on those which explicitly describe their methodology as oral history.

many more recorded by other interviewers, and interviewed tens of other narrators.<sup>52</sup> She even went to such lengths that she moved houses to live closer to her main protagonist and described how turbulent the changes in their relationship were.<sup>53</sup> Marcus O'Dair interviewed seventy-five subjects and recorded around fifty hours with his main protagonist in the time span of approximately four years.<sup>54</sup> Similarly to Fosl, O'Dair praised the longitudinal nature of his collaboration with Wyatt, which helped him feel comfortable bringing up any topics he, as an author, considered important. However, later, he still reflected on certain self-censorship or sensitivity while opening topics such as suicide attempts, alcoholism, or Wyatt's accident which left him paraplegic.<sup>55</sup>

McFadzean, on the other hand, recorded eight interviews with his subject in only five months but reflected on their dynamic relationship anyway. These changes helped them establish "a common language which facilitated the more effective wording of questions and closer, more immediate analysis of responses."<sup>56</sup> Like Braden, Bowie also made it clear that he wished to avoid some topics (although we do not know which ones), which McFadzean respected.<sup>57</sup> Unlike Fosl, though, McFadzean did not record any interviews with anyone else.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, since their interviews were recorded in 1993 and the final text was finished in 1996, he probably spent at least three to four years conducting his research, and although McFadzean's other interactions with Bowie were not recorded, the two stayed in touch and planned to further cooperate even after the research was finished.<sup>59</sup>

These short examples already show several common aspects of this type of research: usually, it is longitudinal not only in terms of the research (which would not be much different from any biography) but also in the very relationship between the researcher and the researched subject – and sometimes the biographer's relationship with family members,

<sup>52</sup> C. FOSL, *Subversive Southerner*, pp. 393–394; C. FOSL, *When Subjects Talk Back*, p. 62.

<sup>53</sup> At first, she lived almost 650 kilometers away from her; eventually, she moved to her narrator's hometown, Louisville, which improved their relationship and communication. C. FOSL, *When Subjects Talk Back*, pp. 64–65.

<sup>54</sup> M. O'DAIR, *Pacts, paratext and polyphony*, p. 285.

<sup>55</sup> M. O'DAIR, *Pacts, paratext and polyphony*, pp. 286–287.

<sup>56</sup> A. MCFADZEAN, *Interviews With Robert Bowie*, pp. 40, 44.

<sup>57</sup> A. MCFADZEAN, *Interviews With Robert Bowie*, p. 46.

<sup>58</sup> A. MCFADZEAN, "I Think He Is a Very Clever Man with Words", pp. 415–416.

<sup>59</sup> A. MCFADZEAN, *Interviews With Robert Bowie*, p. 44.

friends, or former colleagues of their subject too. This relationship is also usually dynamic, which means that it changes and develops over time as the two get to know each other, and it is also asymmetrical in the sense that the narrator gives us, researchers, often much more than we can give to them.<sup>60</sup> For example, we do not usually tell them our life story after they tell us theirs. As McFadzean noted, this collaboration is also about finding a common language or even constant negotiating, which does not occur in research focused on protagonists who are long deceased. Marcus O'Dair summarized: "I must have sensed, if not necessarily entirely consciously, that the entire project relied on an ongoing relationship that was at least cordial, while also being aware of the need to maintain a certain critical distance."<sup>61</sup>

It is exactly this moment – the fact that the “entire project relied on an ongoing relationship” – that is the most crucial in this approach because although we may record our interviews quickly, in a matter of months like McFadzean, and make copies of private documents swiftly, this is not where our “dependence” on the main narrator ends. Since we discuss scholarly research here, which is carried out at academic institutions, not only do those have their own regulations, but we are also obliged to respect applicable legislation; in this case, our collaboration with all narrators is based on their informed consent for processing and accessing personal and sensitive data.

## Research Ethics

In Czechia, an informed consent document must be in accordance with Act no. 110/2019 Coll., on the processing of personal data, and the Civil Code (Act no. 89/2012 Coll.), as per further regulations, and in accordance with the regulation (EU) 2016/679 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data (GDPR). Although the actual legal norms and ethical regulations differ according to the time when or country where the research is conducted,<sup>62</sup> the main principles of ethical approaches

<sup>60</sup> M. VANĚK, P. MŮCKE, *Třetí strana trojúhelníku*, p. 162.

<sup>61</sup> M. O'DAIR, *Pacts, paratext and polyphony*, p. 286.

<sup>62</sup> In Czechia, oral history research is addressed by the Code of Ethics of the Czech Oral History Association. ČESKÁ ASOCIACE ORÁLNÍ HISTORIE, *Etický*

toward living participants (i.e., narrators), are similar, and the main practical reason why we rely on our narrators, even after we finish recording an oral history interview, is because they can withdraw their informed consent at any time, without reason. While Dunaway said in the early 1990s that living subjects “can hound or sue,”<sup>63</sup> they can also, first and foremost, very easily withdraw their consent. Should they do so after the biography is published, there is not much we can do about it, except that we will not be able to use the interviews any longer. On the other hand, should the subject of a biography withdraw consent before publication, the project is jeopardized because we would lose these sources.<sup>64</sup> As researchers, we find ourselves in a difficult situation: we have access to the main historical actor we write about, but this access and our whole relationship are also very fragile. Therefore, the very nature of this type of *contemporary biography* is its strongest and, at the same time, its weakest specifics. Biographers handle them differently and individually, yet they seem to share several common traits in their interactions with their main narrators.

Catherine Fosl not only respected her subject’s wish to avoid one topic, but she also realized that she felt more comfortable writing about the earlier years of her subject, which helped her secure some temporal distance.<sup>65</sup> She also decided to allow her subject a chance to read the manuscript before its publication. She said: “At the eleventh hour in relation to my deadline – a gesture very much her style – Anne [her subject] agreed to a final set of interviews and a joint “writers’ retreat” during which she would read my final draft of Chapters 1 through 11 and have the opportunity to clarify her voice by speaking directly to matters she felt were distorted or missing in the manuscript. [...] If Anne were here with me today [...] she would proactively dissociate from it, reiterating that ‘it’s Cate’s book,’ and elaborating on how different it would have been had we written it together.”<sup>66</sup> The author described here how it was her initiative to allow her subject to read it before print – like we have seen

*kodex České asociace orální historie*, [http://www.coha.cz/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Etický\\_kodex\\_COHA\\_2024\\_novela.pdf](http://www.coha.cz/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Etický_kodex_COHA_2024_novela.pdf) (accessed on 1 February 2025). Cf. D. A. RITCHIE, *Doing Oral History*, pp. 227–233.

<sup>63</sup> D. K. DUNAWAY, *The Oral Biography*, p. 258.

<sup>64</sup> Then, the only way to use the interview is to use it in a completely anonymized version, which is almost impossible in biographical research.

<sup>65</sup> C. FOSL, *When Subjects Talk Back*, p. 64.

<sup>66</sup> C. FOSL, *When Subjects Talk Back*, pp. 66–67.



with Houda and his book about Nohavica – and how her protagonist (although she was, unlike Nohavica, “vocal” not “silent”) emphasized who the author was, while she did not authorize it. This sheds a different light on the problematics of authorization, which, for example, Hans Renders has discussed and criticized.<sup>67</sup>

For Renders, an agreement about authorization between the author and the subject “always involves giving up independence.”<sup>68</sup> He uses many examples, especially biographies of celebrities or well-known figures, and claims that often, an authorized biography is only a “masquerading of an autobiography as a biography,” with the protagonist aiming to paint a positive picture of themselves while claiming they were not the painter, so to speak.<sup>69</sup> However, according to him, authorization in biographical research often exceeds the journalistic practice of the protagonist declaring “that they have not been misquoted or misunderstood” and often includes them claiming whether or not “they agree with what the biographer has written,” which brings a completely new quality into this relationship.<sup>70</sup> It was Marcus O’Dair who addressed this issue directly because his biography of Robert Wyatt illustrates a different approach than Fosl.

While Fosl decided by herself to allow her protagonist to consult the final manuscript without the final book being “authorized,” O’Dair knew from the beginning that Wyatt and his wife wanted to “read the manuscript prior to publication” while insisting that it should remain “his” book.<sup>71</sup> The request, to which the author agreed, later caused the final book to have “authorized biography” in the title. Nevertheless, O’Dair distanced himself from Renders’ criticism because he believed there might be a different understanding of what authorization encompasses. It does not necessarily have to mean that the main subject *agrees* with what the author wrote; instead, he claims, “at least some subjects are apparently willing to authorize life stories that are not entirely

<sup>67</sup> HANS RENDERS, *Biography is not a selfie. Authorisation as the creeping transition from autobiography to biography*, in: *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History*, (edd.) Hans Renders, Binne de Haan, Jonne Harmsma, Abingdon-on-Thames 2016, pp. 176–181.

<sup>68</sup> H. RENDERS, *Biography is not a selfie*, pp. 163–164.

<sup>69</sup> H. RENDERS, *Biography is not a selfie*, p. 161.

<sup>70</sup> H. RENDERS, *Biography is not a selfie*, p. 160.

<sup>71</sup> M. O’DAIR, *Pacts, paratext and polyphony*, p. 280.

flattering.”<sup>72</sup> It is O’Dair’s notion of the problem of *authorship*, where Renders anticipated that it might shift from the historian to the subject of the biography, should they have the right of authorization, that leads us to yet another concept, which in oral history is commonly known as *sharing* and *shared authority*.

This term was introduced in the 1980s and further elaborated on in the 1990s by Michael Frisch.<sup>73</sup> It refers to both the nature of oral history as a “collaborative process” (*shared authority*) and the question of whether researchers may want to allow their narrators to co-create not only their oral history interviews but also their interpretations (*sharing authority*). As Frisch later summarized: “[...] sharing authority is an approach to doing oral history, while a shared authority is something we need to recognize *in it*.”<sup>74</sup>

The collaborative character of oral history – both optional and present in the mere nature of its methodology – thus led, in my opinion, to many oral historians willing to consult their research findings with their protagonists, no matter their approach (thematic or biographical) or their narrators’ demands. This could also be the reason why authors within contemporary oral history-based biographical research tend to allow their protagonist to have their say in the final interpretation, whereby the prior agreement over authorization – or the lack of it – is not the main decisive point. It is as if even those authors who did not choose the approach of *sharing authority* still realized that the *shared authority* was present in the very nature of their project and thus felt that consulting the final text with the main protagonist may not be their duty but a common expectation, since, at the end of the day, the subsequent book or a thesis will, very probably, have not only the author’s but also the subject’s name on the cover (and hence, probably, a more nuanced understanding of the word *authorization* in the context of oral history).

This aspect of dealing with the main protagonist – which entails a potential question of authorization and sharing/shared authority, the author’s own restraints over selected topics, intensive and often emotional and long-term collaboration, and overall high-risk collaboration, when

<sup>72</sup> M. O’DAIR, *Pacts, paratext and polyphony*, p. 290.

<sup>73</sup> MICHAEL FRISCH, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*, Albany 1990.

<sup>74</sup> MICHAEL FRISCH, *Commentary: Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Process*, *The Oral History Review* 30/2003, no. 1, p. 113.

the research is dependent largely on a relationship and consent from one main narrator – may be seen as its weakness. However, I demonstrate how authors used it as an opportunity and created biographies in which they allowed their subjects, sometimes at the last minute, to participate in research while protecting their own authorial independence.

Anyhow, the aim of this essay is not to decide what an ideal approach would be; Renders would make a plea for unauthorized biographies written ideally after the subject dies, i.e. the after-the-fact ones.<sup>75</sup> He also emphasizes that “a good biography is not a book of praise” and that a “serious biography is not based solely on interviews.”<sup>76</sup> Naturally, authors of contemporary biographies, whose methodology is also based on oral history, would more likely identify with another renowned biographer, Nigel Hamilton, who, in his second work about Bill Clinton, wrote: “Contemporary history and biography cannot be written without oral history—especially where the documents relating to a presidency are not available.”<sup>77</sup> Although in his research he did not interview Clinton himself (albeit he tried to<sup>78</sup>), Hamilton’s view only adds another reason why researchers may want to talk to the protagonist(s) directly: sometimes other specific sources may exist, but at the time they are simply not (yet) available. At the end of the day, if all biographies have a “shelf life,”<sup>79</sup> why omit the possibility for the first biography (or one of the first biographies) to include the main protagonist, capturing their emic perspective – with all the limits it may have – and secondarily, should all parties agree, thereby creating sources for many more biographies to come? For, as Donald A. Ritchie said in a similar context: “Today’s oral historians are doing the preliminary work of tomorrow’s biographers and researchers, hoping they will not have to agonize too often over the questions we failed to ask.”<sup>80</sup>

Moreover, the cited biographies, both older and recent, where the main protagonist either stayed *silent* or actively participated in *narrating*

<sup>75</sup> H. RENDERS, *Biography is not a selfie*, p. 163.

<sup>76</sup> H. RENDERS, *Biography is not a selfie*, p. 160.

<sup>77</sup> NIGEL HAMILTON, *Bill Clinton: Mastering the Presidency*, New York 2007, p. 658.

<sup>78</sup> NIGEL HAMILTON, *Bill Clinton: An American Journey: Great Expectations*, New York 2003, pp. xiii–xvi.

<sup>79</sup> HANS RENDERS, *Did Pearl Harbor Change Everything? The Deadly Sins of Biographers*, *Journal of Historical Biography* 2/2008, no. 3, p. 95.

<sup>80</sup> D. A. RITCHIE, *Doing Oral History*, p. 34.

their own life story, all prove that their authors would essentially agree with the other two statements. Since I deliberately excluded *oral biography*, all cited works were based on oral history as well as archival research. This type of research has been present since the first works of Nevins, later recommended by Mitchell in the 1970s and endorsed by Dunaway in the 1990s,<sup>81</sup> and conducted by all others from McFadzean and Fosl to Houda. At the same time, their works do not necessarily praise their main heroes. Of course, historiography, along with biography and oral history, has developed and changed significantly during the last almost hundred years that have passed since the foundational texts by Nevins; however, from the *post-positivist* and *cultural turn*, at the latest, we can see a rise in interpretative and critical biography in oral history, too.

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Given this, I feel it necessary to finally mention my own experience with writing precisely this type of biography, which was a biography of Ivan M. Havel (1938–2021), a Czech scientist and philosopher. I conducted my research primarily from 2011 to 2013 for my Master's thesis and then revised the text for a book, which was published in 2017.<sup>82</sup> Without knowing about the emerging theoretical discussions in the field of biography studies and having only a limited knowledge of oral historians' experiences with biography presented here, I often guessed in my approaches, working on instinct rather than knowing exactly what I was doing. Surprisingly enough, though, I often proceeded in my research almost identically as the authors cited above: my biography was based on eight oral history interviews with Havel, several interviews with others, and extensive archival research. I sent Havel the text before the book was published, although he never asked me to, and he clarified mainly the parts focused on his scientific work in mathematics or computer science but did not request any changes in my interpretations. The only wish he had, and which he told me when we first met, which was a day after his brother Václav passed away, was that he wished he would not be portrayed *only as a brother* of the famous Václav Havel, which was not my

<sup>81</sup> D. J. MITCHELL, 'Living Documents': *Oral History and Biography*, p. 285; DAVID KING DUNAWAY, *Method and Theory in the Oral Biography*, *Oral History* 20/1992, no. 2, p. 41.

<sup>82</sup> JANA WOHLMUTH MARKUPOVÁ, *Ivan M. Havel: od Puzuka k Sakatekovi (1938–1989)*, Prague 2017.

intention anyway. I always thought that as a scientist, he had a particular understanding of what research is – albeit in different disciplines – and what an author’s freedom and independence mean, and that he would not want to interrupt them. Like Fosl, I felt I needed to end my biography in an earlier era because I thought I could not write an “ending” to the life of a protagonist who was still alive and well.

I only realized while writing this essay that I have not yet, in a written form, reflected on my research as Dunaway, Fosl, O’Dair, or Valerie Yow did. I have used it as an example at conferences and lectures, but strangely enough, I have never written about it. Was I shy because Havel could read it? I may not have thought so at the time, but it could have been the case anyway. This essay is not the right place for a complete treatment either. Nevertheless, this article and my brief reflection show that although all personalities – and their biographies as well as oral history interviews – are unique, there are common themes that may be discussed on a more general level.

## Conclusion

This essay introduced historical and recent experiences with a type of biographical writing commonly known as *contemporary biography*. The primary specifics of this approach is that it focuses on still-living protagonists of research, which brings several advantages and challenges. The primary advantage is that we as researchers can talk, in person, with the person we write our biography about, which can be beneficial if our subject did not leave many or any ego-documents, or if they decide to grant access to their personal archive. First and foremost, the main protagonist as a narrator in an oral history research, i.e., the living subject today, can, to paraphrase McFadzean, provide a personal tour through their life in search for themselves as the historical figure. However, not only can *we* talk to *them*, but *they* can “talk” *into* our research as well, which seems to be a common reason for some biographers to prefer historical and after-the-fact biographies instead, usually in an attempt to avoid the main protagonist’s influence on their work or demands for authorization.

Nevertheless, this study focused on the reflections of biographers who combine a biographical approach with oral history and showed that including the still-living main subject of biography may have yet another outcome: securing the author’s freedom and, simultaneously, adhering

to research ethics. I have, therefore, introduced a long history of combining oral history and biographical research and offered two participatory types of the main subject's role in the research: the first one *silent*, whereby the biographical protagonist participates but does not provide any oral history interview, and the second *vocal*, whereby the protagonist is active in the role of an oral history *narrator*.

The current experience of biographers who used oral history, though, also relativizes the premise that the right time to write a biography is when the main subject passes away. I have mentioned Dunaway's (unauthorized) biography of Pete Seeger and Yow's biographies of two writers, Betty Smith and Bernice Kelly Harris. The first author (of a contemporary biography) pointed out that he did not have any troubles with Seeger, but instead with one of Seeger's friends, who claimed to have been misquoted "and threatened to sue."<sup>83</sup> Yow reflected thoroughly on one particular situation when she was writing a (belated) biography of Smith, whereby she collaborated with Smith's daughter, and because she needed access to her subject's personal archive, had to get the permission of other heirs as well. Although some heirs expressed their gratitude, Smith's daughter gave the author such a hard time that Yow almost gave up, saying that she "planned to stash the manuscript in the attic and let the silver fish eat it."<sup>84</sup> Eventually, she managed to publish the book successfully after she understood the daughter's reasons for interfering, but this is not why I mention Yow's and Dunaway's experiences here. I do so because they show that it is not automatically the living main protagonist who may cause trouble; it may be any other person from their friends and family as well, which would apply to after-the-fact biographies too.

Hence, I argue that biographers do not have to disregard contemporary biography *a priori*; quite the contrary. We already have been having a lively discussion about the current theory of biography.<sup>85</sup> It may be worth considering adding oral history to the table because, to quote Nigel Hamilton, there is no contemporary biography without it.

<sup>83</sup> D. K. DUNAWAY, *Method and Theory in the Oral Biography*, p. 40.

<sup>84</sup> VALERIE RALEIGH YOW, *What every biographer should know: relationships with the family*, *Journal of Media Practice* 11/2010, no. 3, p. 248.

<sup>85</sup> *Fear of Theory: Towards a New Theoretical Justification of Biography*, (edd.) Hans Renders, David Veltman, Leiden–Boston 2021.