

# COMING FROM THE OUTSIDE IN: BEING AN OUTSIDER IN ORAL INTERVIEWS

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*We tried farming in Manitoba, and didn't find it very productive, so we came to British Columbia, and here my parents had a little berry patch and my dad would work out. That's where I came in, and I had to go to Vancouver and work domestic work, like maids. I worked there for several years before I got married—then I got married and had my own family... That's sort of my life.<sup>1</sup>*

This is the very brief life history of Suzie, a Mennonite immigrant from Russia. My research is focused on young, unmarried Mennonite women like Suzie who were able to provide for the economic survival for their families upon their arrival in Canada between 1947 and 1949. While this wave of Mennonite immigrants was able to settle and maintain successful farms in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia, paying off their substantial travel debts remained a challenge. One avenue open to families was to send their

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<sup>1</sup> Suzie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 30 June 2009. Please note that all the names of interviewees in this study have been changed in order to protect their anonymity and confidentiality.

daughters into Vancouver to work in domestic service. These are the women that I interviewed for my project, of which this essay is a part.<sup>2</sup> Rather than focus on their stories, however, this essay addresses the processes and theory of oral interviews, the politics of oral history, the difficult position of being an outsider doing oral interviews, and the use of feminist approaches to history to help an outsider find her way in.

Oral history once had only a democratising intent -- that is, to recover the voices and experiences of marginalized groups. However, the sophistication and analysis of the field of oral history has grown significantly in recent years, incorporating ideas about memory, subjectivity, and reflexivity. Michael Frisch, a prominent oral historian, claims that oral interviews require a “self-conscious and reflective” approach that goes beyond merely transcribing interviews and using quotes as “historical evidence... [that] tells it like it was.”<sup>3</sup> Historians who use oral interviews are required to

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<sup>2</sup> Interview participants for this small-scale study were recruited primarily through the Mennonite Historical Society and narrator referrals, as snowballing led from one interview to another. Therefore, almost all narrators are still practicing members of the Mennonite faith and continue to be active in their church community. While I made enquiries, I was unsuccessful in gaining referrals for individuals who had left the community after their work, and I recognize that this has limited the scope of my study. Seventeen interviews were conducted over a six-month period: two interviews on site at the historical society; all others, in the homes of my narrators, who lived in Abbotsford, Langley, Aldergrove, Yarrow, and Vancouver. I interviewed Ruth and Katy together; all other narrators spoke to me in one-on-one interviews. The length of the interviews ranged from 40 to 120 minutes, while most averaged around 60 minutes.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 7-8.

equip themselves with theoretical tools with which to approach their work.

While oral interviews are gaining ground as reputable primary sources, the Western preoccupation with written text continues to render oral sources questionable and at times unreliable.<sup>4</sup> In a field such as history, where objectivity is often seen as a hallmark of academic work, oral sources are too frequently seen as subjective, plagued by issues around memory, lapsed time, and personal bias. Historians' claim to create truth about the past, however, "obscures the fact that people's perceptions of reality are in fact all we can recover from the past."<sup>5</sup> The subjectivity of oral history can tell us much about the meaning of an event or activity, rather than simply an account of what happened. When narrators share stories, the interviewer may be able to discern "what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, [and] what they now think they did."<sup>6</sup> Oral history accounts demonstrate the worldview of the individuals relating them—the mental landscape in which they organize their past in the present. Oral history narratives need not be mined for facts so much as explored for the meanings behind the narratives. In the case of my project, narrators' stories would allow me to understand how these women saw themselves in relation to their ethnoreligious community, their work, and their own past.

At the onset of my research, I had no relationship with the women to whom I needed to speak. I am not a Mennonite; I cannot speak German; I do not share their ethnoreligious

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance Susan Geiger, "What's So Feminist About Women's Oral History?" *Journal of Women's Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 169-182; and Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History," *History Workshop Journal* 12, no 1 (1981): 96-107.

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Freund and Laura Quilici, "Exploring Myths in Women's Narratives: Italian and German Immigrant Women in Vancouver, 1947-1961," *Oral History Review* 23, no. 2 (Winter 1996): 19.

<sup>6</sup> Portelli, 100.

background; I am not an immigrant, nor have I ever worked as a domestic worker; and I am substantially younger. My surname was of no help to me: it could not “give me a bit of confidence” the way it does Mennonite historians who embark on similar research, since a Mennonite name is “easily identified by other Mennonites, which ensures that despite assimilation in dress or language, one Mennonite can still spot another.”<sup>7</sup> Clearly, I was an outsider in my narrators’ eyes.

There are a number of historians of historians in the field of Mennonite history who research and interview members of their own communities. As insiders, these historians are able to understand the cultural and religious cues, symbols, and rules that are at play during interviews. Furthermore, an insider begins his or her research already equipped with numerous connections and resources within the community. This same ease of access was not available to me. Unlike Mennonite historians, I was not expecting to be “cordially welcomed as a member of the tribe.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, at the outset of my research I barely knew what the “tribe” was all about, where the members came from, and how they got here.

To add to the difficulties that generally plague outsiders in oral research, I was also dealing with a group of individuals who were wary of strangers. Many of them retained the Mennonite worldview that was so common during the 1950s, that the city was a place of evil and the hiding place of the devil. As one narrator described, the city was considered:

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<sup>7</sup> Pamela E. Klassen, *Going by the Moon and the Stars: Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 4, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Solomon Stucky, *The Heritage of the Swiss Volhynian Mennonites* (Waterloo, Ontario: Conrad Press, 1981), 14.

[A] kind of sinful place to be... There wasn't necessarily any history of an experience factor that motivated this kind of thinking, but there was a great fear that parents had... The city has to be evil, and you had to insulate yourself from that, and probably isolate yourself.<sup>9</sup>

Katie, similarly, recalled that her father “was reluctant to let me go to that wicked city.”<sup>10</sup> Part of Mennonite religious identity stemmed from a belief in living simple, upright lives through nonconformity to the world and rural isolation. If one moved from that rural existence, there was a risk that all of the temptations in the city would take one’s focus away from God and turn it onto oneself. The Fraser Valley Mennonites oriented their actions through this worldview.<sup>11</sup> From my perspective, this isolation made accessing interviews a daunting task.

I had two choices: give up on oral interviews and use written sources, or determine a way to gain access to this group of women. I chose the latter. Oral interviews are a valuable primary source, especially in cases where interviews give a voice to those who have, in the past, been silenced. Frisch asserts that oral testimonies allow historians to “swing the flashlight of history into a significant, much neglected,

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<sup>9</sup> Peter, interview by author, Burnaby, BC, 17 June 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Katie, interview by author, Abbotsford, BC, 9 April 2010.

<sup>11</sup> All of the women interviewed for this study did indeed interact with their employers, bus drivers, retail workers, and other outsiders in Vancouver during their time in domestic service. However, they spent most of their limited free time strictly with other young Mennonite women, either visiting the local Mennonite girls’ home each Thursday afternoon or attending Mennonite church services Sunday mornings. Even now, these women continue to associate and trust mainly other Mennonites, who speak their native Low German tongue and share their worldview.

and previously unknowable corner of the attic.”<sup>12</sup> While there have been many developments in the field of Mennonite women’s history and gender analysis, Mennonite women’s voices are still to a large degree absent from the historiography.<sup>13</sup>

As an outsider attempting to enter into an extremely close-knit and, to a certain extent still isolated population, it was important for my name and my research project to have visibility in the community before I entered it physically. In the preliminary stages of my research, I sent numerous emails to prominent members of the Fraser Valley Mennonite community outlining my academic background and research goals, and explained that I would contact them once again when the first year of coursework came to an end. Among my contacts were the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia (MHSBC), the Mennonite Heritage Center Archives, and Dr. Ruth Derksen Siemens, a well-known local Mennonite historian. All were quite receptive to my project and provided me with suggestions regarding where I might begin the research process. One of my sources, for example, directed me towards the German-language newspaper *Der Bote*.

A year later, at the outset of the interview process, I was able to write a short article for the Mennonite General Conference newsletter, which again described my academic background and the goals of the research project. Though it was brief, the article served to remind community members of my project, and possibly influenced their decision to be

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<sup>12</sup> Frisch, *A Shared Authority*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> See for instance the work of Gloria Neufeld Redekop, *The Work of Their Hands: Mennonite Women’s Societies in Canada* (Waterloo, Ontario: The Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996); Marlene Epp, *Women Without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), and Klassen, *Going by the Moon and the Stars*.

involved. Soon after, when I began contacting individuals for interviews, many of them recalled reading my article in the newsletter. Furthermore, the article inspired some to take the initiative to contact me. One woman, Frieda, even sent a letter along with a number of photographs from her time in the city.

In terms of gaining access to a closed community, having a gatekeeper is essential for outsider researchers.<sup>14</sup> A gatekeeper is an individual in the position to “provide—directly or indirectly—access to key resources needed to do research, be those resources logistical, human, institutional, or informational.”<sup>15</sup> Gatekeepers are vital to accessing information that might otherwise be inaccessible to an outsider. The MHSBC acted as my first gatekeeper. Meetings at the historical society office, or over coffee or lunch at local establishments, with the longtime director, the manager, and the newsletter editor resulted in the acquisition of various works published privately by local Mennonites, memoirs, and contact information for a potential first participant. I was able to gain access to information that would have been otherwise unattainable or extremely difficult to locate in an academic setting.

Making connections with gatekeepers is also useful for outsiders to demonstrate that they have been accepted by members of the group. Many of the people that I met asked me if I was a Mennonite, a part of their “tribe.” I was able to

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<sup>14</sup> To see how other researchers have utilized gatekeepers in their work, see for instance A. Salmon, “Walking the Walk: How Participatory Interview Methods Can Democratize Research,” *Qualitative Health Research*, 17, no. 7 (2007): 982-993; and Sabrina Faiz Rashid, “Accessing Married Adolescent Women: The Realities of Ethnographic Research in an Urban Slum Environment in Dhaka, Bangladesh,” *Field Methods* 19 (2007): 369-383.

<sup>15</sup> Lisa M. Campbell et al., “Gatekeepers and Keymasters: Dynamic Relationships of Access in Geographical Fieldwork,” *Geographical Review* 93, no. 1 (January 2006): 3.

draw upon my experiences with historical society members in conversations with narrators, thus diminishing my outsider status. The well-known and respected community members with whom I had already made contact acted as my ‘Mennonite references.’ Much like a work-related reference, these individuals were able to vouch for my character and the research that I was about to undertake.

In terms of human resources -- namely, individuals to interview -- a gatekeeper proved to be an invaluable tool, especially for an outsider like myself with limited connections to the community. Maria turned out to be just such a person for me.<sup>16</sup> My first meeting with Maria went well and she even invited me to stay for a waffle lunch. After this first successful meeting, we discussed my project on many occasions, and I sent her articles and translated copies of the German newspaper articles I had found regarding Mennonite women’s domestic work. Maria made phone calls on my behalf, told potential narrators how much she had enjoyed the interview process, and suggested that they contact me. My solid relationship with Maria, and her ongoing interest in the project, led to contacts with ten of my final seventeen interviewees.

It is important to note that gatekeepers can have an adverse affect if one is not careful. Gatekeepers have “the power to determine the ways in which potential participants are informed about the study... which may influence potential participants’ willingness to participate.”<sup>17</sup> The gatekeeper may go out of his or her way to discourage potential narrators from consenting to interviews if he or she holds a negative view of

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<sup>16</sup> Maria was the third person I interviewed for my project. Her father was killed during the war. In order to help her mother and siblings, she worked in Vancouver as a day worker in the field of domestic service.

<sup>17</sup> Gurchathen S. Sangera and Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert, “Methodological Dilemmas: Gatekeepers and Positionality in Bradford,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 3 (March 2008): 552.

the researcher. Especially in a tight-knit community like the one in which I was hoping to work, this would have been disastrous. It is best for the researchers to first enter the field already having completed a substantial amount of research into the history, customs, and rules of the community. It is also useful for the researcher to be clear about the aims of his or her research, as well as forthcoming with personal information. In this regard, a feminist methodology was important as I negotiated my position in the community.

There is nothing “inherently feminist about women’s oral histories or women doing women’s oral histories.”<sup>18</sup> Rather, it is the methodology and objectives of the project that make it feminist. While there are many diverse views about the content and methodology of feminist practice, there are certain elements on which feminist scholars agree. Most important for me was the need to realize the human element in oral fieldwork. I came to the kitchen table of each narrator’s home knowing that the woman sitting across from me was not merely a text or another primary source, but a human being.

Sociologist Verta Taylor argues that feminist interviews should be open and reciprocal, and that there should be empathy between the researcher and the narrator.<sup>19</sup> So often in oral interviews the interviewer has a dominant position; he or she “knows all the questions to ask and by implication all the answers.”<sup>20</sup> In the case of my own research, I ensured that there was a balance of power between narrators and myself. Interviewees were always free to diverge from the topic at hand as they shared information about their lives. I encouraged interviewees to ask me any questions about my

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<sup>18</sup> Gieger, 169.

<sup>19</sup> Verta Taylor, “Feminist Methodology in Social Movements Research,” *Qualitative Sociology* 21, no. 4 (December 1998): 371.

<sup>20</sup> Valerie Yow, “‘Do I Like Them Too Much?’: Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Visa-Versa,” *Oral History Review* 24, no.1 (Summer 1997): 67.

own experiences. It was common, for example, for interviewees to question why, as a non-Mennonite, I was undertaking this project. These questions allowed the conversation to steer towards the immigration experiences of my own parents and their time under the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. Like Verta Taylor, I spoke openly with interviewees about my life.<sup>21</sup> The women's initial fears or hesitations about a formal interview quickly faded with friendly chats over tea, German cookies, and cool watermelon in the summer heat.

Another important element of feminist oral history is the concept of 'giving back' to interviewees. Giving back need not occur on a large scale, with grand gestures or lifelong indebtedness. The researcher needs to be aware of her own time restrictions in terms of her project. A more realistic approach to 'giving back' can take the form of collaboration between researcher and interviewee. In oral histories, a fully realized collaboration occurs when discussion and decision-making is shared throughout the entire process—from the interviews themselves to the analysis and final conclusions.<sup>22</sup> Collaboration is a "long haul" process, with interpretations established over time through a plethora of meetings between the researcher and interviewee.<sup>23</sup> For many researchers, however, a true collaboration is an unrealistic goal. Marlene Epp's research, for example, was informed by a feminist approach, but she found that it was impossible to create a complete collaboration between researcher and interviewee.<sup>24</sup> Like Epp, I was not able to involve my narrators in the

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<sup>21</sup> Taylor, 371.

<sup>22</sup> See for instance the confessional article on the topic of collaboration, by Lorraine Sitzia, "A Shared Authority: An Impossible Goal?," *The Oral History Review* 30, no.1 (2003): 87-101.

<sup>23</sup> Linda Shopes, "Commentary: Sharing Authority," *Oral History Review* 30, no.1 (2003): 105.

<sup>24</sup> Epp, *Women Without Men*, 13.

analysis of my research due to the time restrictions of my relatively small-scale project.

I will, however, be able to give back to the women and the broader Mennonite community in other ways. When my project is completed, I will make a second visit to each narrator to let her know how the work went and to present her with a transcribed copy of her interview, along with a copy of my completed thesis.<sup>25</sup> In addition, when the written project is completely finished, I intend to donate a copy to the MHSBC, along with much of the non-interview primary information I have collected, such as the translated articles from the *Der Bote* newspaper, letters from narrators, and the numerous photographs given to me by interviewees.<sup>26</sup> I then will have successfully accomplished my initial aim to create thesis that relies on a feminist methodology.

Though my status as an outsider and the secluded nature of the Fraser Valley Mennonite community initially put me at a disadvantage in terms of oral interviews, I felt that the strengths and benefits of oral narratives were too great for me to rely only on written documents. Guidelines established by oral historians and ethnographers allowed me to ease my way into the community. When it came time to actually conduct the interviews, the use of a feminist methodology created a respectful and trusting relationship between interviewees and

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<sup>25</sup> Many of my narrators were shy and nervous about doing an interview at first, claiming that they did not remember enough to be very helpful to me and advising that I should not get my hopes up. However, all of my interview participants had much to say, and every story contributed in one way or another to my understanding of their experiences. All of the narrators' names in this work are pseudonyms; when I visit them with the completed thesis, I will show them which name has been assigned to them so that they will be able to see exactly in what ways their stories contributed to my work.

<sup>26</sup> This will all be done with the permission of those who provided me with these sources.

myself. Interviewees were given the space to tell their stories, reminisce about the past, and be heard, while I was able to gain the information I needed to create a rich, detailed, and respectful project. I no longer feel like a complete stranger.