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American Oral History Archives on Slavic Immigration. An Overview of Preserving Slavic Immigrants' Life Stories



Immigration is one of the most important and dynamic phenomena in the world. Immigration took on new forms after World War I, as many Europeans began migrating to the United States due to the economic depression. The great influx of Slavs into the United States began during the mid-19th century and gained momentum in the 20th century, having a strong influence on the shape of Slavic communities within the United States. According to Manning, we can divide the growth of Slavic influence in the United States into four periods¹. The first phase until 1848 is characterized by the fact that immigrants arrived individually and, with a few exceptions, were quickly absorbed. The second phase takes place from 1848 to 1924. This is a period when many unskilled workers arrived in the United States. At the same time, Slavic life in America was developing with the organization and establishment of ecclesiastical relations. The third phase is considered

¹ C. A. MANNING, *A History of Slavic Studies in the United States*, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 1957, p. 15.

to be the period from 1924 to 1939. Although there is no large-scale immigration wave, the Slavic communities, during this period, attracted the attention of the Americans, as they are in the final stage of adapting to the American way of life. The fourth phase is considered to be from World War II onwards, when there was widespread immigration to the United States.

This essay presents selected archival oral history collections and projects conducted in the United States, which include oral testimonies and life stories of first- and second-generation Slavic immigrants in the United States during the late 19th and 20th centuries. The selected archives will be presented per collection, emphasizing their significance for contemporary history and highlighting the importance of “history from below”, which is based on the value of personal experience. In parallel, aspects of the Slavic immigration to the US and their living conditions are presented.

On the occasion of these valuable oral history records it is worth noting the importance of oral testimony in modern historiography. Approaching the events through the narration of those who lived them illuminates historiography in a different way. Oral History is a new concept of historiography both in terms of content and method and can be used to change the focus of history and open up new areas of research. The purpose of oral history is, on the one hand, the creation of primary documents as a basis for the establishment of archives, and, on the other hand, the interpretation, the process of “synthesis” of history from oral narratives². The “construction of memory” is part of a continuous process of interpretation and reinterpretation of the past, which governs the structure of memory and therefore the logic of life storytelling³. Collections of oral testimonies, unlike conventional historical archives, are often set up from the outset as counter-archives by groups or collectives who believe that their own history has been silenced, deserves to be saved for the future, and should be made immediately accessible to the general public⁴. The counter-archive of oral history does not comment on or narrate only historical events. It is a live, mobile, variable and intuitive archive⁵. Regarding the recording and preservation of the life stories of Slavic immigrants in the United States during the 20th century, it can be observed that there is a great deal of interest from independent researchers, universities, institutions and museums, which is constantly evolving.

² Β. Σακκά, *Προφορική Ιστορία και Σχολείο: Η ιστορία ως βιωμένη εμπειρία και η διδακτική της αξιοποίηση*, [in:] *Πρακτικά του Συνεδρίου ΣΕΦΚ-ΠΕΦ, Λεμεσός 3–4.10.2008* [to be published], p. 3–4.

³ Ρ. Βαν Μπούσχοτεν, *Δεκαετία του '40: Διαστάσεις της μνήμης σε αφηγήσεις ζωής της περιόδου*, “Επιθεώρηση Κοινωνικών Ερευνών” 107, 2002, p. 137.

⁴ ΕΑΔΕΜ, *Αρχεία, αντι-αρχεία και προφορική ιστορία*, [in:] *Προφορική ιστορία και αντι-αρχεία: Φωνές, εικόνες και τόποι*, Βόλος 2021, p. 13.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

Through oral history projects, Slavs in the United States are given the opportunity to reconstruct their micro-history. They reproduce their past and place it in the modern present, historicizing it in the present socio-economic, political and personal conditions. Through the life stories of Slavic immigrants, concerns, thoughts, feelings, worries and fears are highlighted, such as unemployment, violence, deprivation of values and insecurity during immigration and settling in the United States, emerge. At this point it is worth mentioning two projects. American West Center has organized the *South Slavic oral history project*, which was conducted between 1972–1973 and consists of transcripts of interviews with about forty individuals of South Slavic descent⁶. Also, in the University of California's collection, seven people discuss their life in Russia and California within the project *Russian Émigré Recollections: Life in California and Russia*⁷.

Slavs often found employment in coal mines in the US. Hundreds of southern Slavic families – mostly Croats, Slovenes, Serbs and Montenegrins – moved to mining towns, like in areas in Montana⁸. There they experienced miserable working conditions, illness and the tragic accident of the Smith Mine disaster on 27 February 1943, when 74 miners – of which 16 South Slavs – lost their lives⁹. The *Anna Zellick Oral History Collection* consists of interviews with mostly South Slavic immigrants and settlers in south-central Montana¹⁰. Anna Zellick is a descendant of Slavic immigrants to Montana and she showed great interest in recording the life stories of Slavic immigrants in the area. She conducted seventeen interviews for her research in the areas of Red Lodge, Bearcreek, and Roundup. The subject material spans from around 1890 to 1944 and covers immigration, coal mining, education, employment, ethnicity, religion, and the general social make-up of the respective communities. Moreover, the interviews recognize the connections that the Slavs shared with one another and reveal socio-ethnic information relating to class, wealth, and social standing¹¹. Through these oral testimonies, it is clear how the South Slavs contributed

⁶ American West Center. *South Slavic oral history project: 1972–1973*, J. Willard Marriott Library, The University of Utah, archiveswest.orbiscascade.org/ark:/80444/xv56857 [4.06.2022].

⁷ University of California. *Russian emigré recollections: life in Russia and California: Oral history transcript: 1979–1983*, Bancroft Library Regional Oral History Office, archive.org/details/russianemigre00pierrich [4.06.2022].

⁸ A. ZELICK, *Childhood memories of South Slavic Immigrants in Red Lodge and Bearcreek: Montana: 1904–1943*, [in:] *European Immigrants in the American West: Community Histories*, Albuquerque 1998, p. 110.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 122.

¹⁰ *Anna Zellick Oral History Collection: 1987–1991*, Montana State University Library, lib.montana.edu/archives/finding-aids/2341.html [4.06.2022].

¹¹ *Loc. cit.*

significantly to the development of Montana both technically and culturally, creating a new generation of Montanans with a deep sense of values¹².

Another oral history project conducted in Montana in 2003 by Allison Fromm is the *Serbian Immigrants in Butte*¹³. The interviewees discuss the Serbian immigrant community in Butte and explain the difficulties they faced during their immigration from Serbia to the United States and how World War I and World War II affected their family members. They emphasize the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Serbian lodges in the lives of community members. They also mention the relationships between different ethnic communities in the area and the work conditions in coal mines¹⁴.

Individual oral history projects are also gaining ground from independent researchers. For example, an interesting interview was conducted by Wheaton College student Douglas Buchanan on 11 December 1987 with the Russian missionary Peter Simon Deyneka, Jr., which is held in the Archives of Wheaton College in Illinois¹⁵. His narrations span from 1931 to 1965. He describes his family and his childhood in Chicago as the child of Russian immigrants, his own education at Wheaton College, his early Christian work in Alaska, South America and Korea, and his decision to go into full-time ministry with the Slavic Gospel Association¹⁶. Another example is Meyer Baylin's interview conducted by Ernest Besig in 1986¹⁷. He discusses growing up in USSR, near Chernobyl, in a poor Jewish grain merchant's family and how he immigrated to New York and then moved in San Antonio, Texas, and Los Angeles. As politically active, he recounts activities of the Communist Party in Los Angeles during the 1920s and organizing for the Party within the Teamsters Union in New York between 1935 and 1943¹⁸.

The Center for Global Migration Studies in the Department of History at the University of Maryland owns certain oral history archives regarding Slavic immigration¹⁹. The *Archive of Immigrant Voices* sheds light on the complexities and

¹² A. ZELICK, *Childhood memories of South Slavic...*, p. 122.

¹³ A. FROMM, *Serbian Immigrants in Butte Oral History Project*, University of Montana-Missoula, Mansfield Library, scholarworks.umt.edu/serbianimmigrants_oralhistory [4.06.2022].

¹⁴ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁵ Wheaton College. *Collection 381 Oral History Interview with Peter Deyneka, Jr., Billy Graham Center Archives Repository*, archives.wheaton.edu/repositories/4/resources/48 [4.06.2022].

¹⁶ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁷ E. BESIG, *Meyer Baylin's oral history, oral history transcript: 1993*, University of California Libraries, archive.org/details/meyerbaylinoral00baylrich [4.06.2022].

¹⁸ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁹ Center for Global Migration Studies. *Archive of Immigrant Voices*, University of Maryland, archiveofimmigrantvoices.omeka.net [4.06.2022].

significance of the contemporary immigrant experience in the United States. Immigrant women with Russian²⁰, Polish²¹ or Ukrainian²² origins chronicle their experiences of immigration and their cultural identities concentrating on the disparities between their home country and the United States. In addition, they discuss the difficulties of finding a job without knowing English²³.

New York, a commercial and economic center, was the main center for the reception and control of immigrants. The inspection took place on a small island, a few kilometers off the port. Ellis Island, off Manhattan, was the main reception point for immigrants arriving in the United States in search of better living conditions. It was inaugurated on 1 January 1892 and closed on 12 November 1954, during the peak years of a worldwide migration. It is estimated that over 14 million migrants passed through Ellis Island²⁴. Naturally, Slavs are found among them. The new arrivals had to pass physical and legal examinations in order to complete the procedure and be ready to set off by the thousands to new jobs and places²⁵. Since 1973 the *Ellis Island Oral History Project* has been dedicated to preserving the testimonies of immigrants who passed through the Ellis Island immigration station between 1892 and 1954 and the employees who worked there²⁶. Yugoslavians, Russians, Slovenes, Poles and Czechoslovakians have discussed their reasons for and experiences of immigration and their first impressions of the United States. Their topics expand into World War II, their stay on Ellis Island mentioning their meals and medical exams, and their lives in the US²⁷.

Another oral history collection based in New York is *Stories of Immigration to Tompkins County*, which was established in 2021 in Tompkins County²⁸. Their aim is to highlight interviews and life stories about the experience of first and second-generation immigrants to Tompkins County and the United States. A few oral testimonies of immigrants from Russia and Poland are included, speaking about the circumstances during World War II and how they managed to emigrate to the US.

²⁰ Interview of Gala Meyerovich; Interview of Bori Cosson; Interview of Dysia Sobol; Interview of Anastasiya Lyudkivich, [in:] Center for Global Migration Studies...

²¹ Interview of Edwarda M. Buda-Okreglak, M.D., [in:] Center for Global Migration Studies...

²² Interview of Natalia Siegel, [in:] Center for Global Migration Studies...

²³ Center for Global Migration Studies...

²⁴ R. H. BAYOR, *Encountering Ellis Island: How European Immigrants Entered America*, Baltimore 2014, p. 25.

²⁵ B. ARDAN, *The Anthracite Coal Region's Slavic Community*, Chicago 2009, p. 32.

²⁶ *The Statue of Liberty. Ellis Island Foundation. Ellis Island Oral History Project*, statueofliberty.org/discover/stories-and-oral-histories [4.06.2022].

²⁷ *Loc. cit.*

²⁸ *The History Center in Tompkins County. Stories of Immigration to Tompkins County*, thehistorycenter.net/OH-Immigration [4.06.2022].

The *New York City Immigrant Labor Oral History Project*, led by Professor Herbert Gutman, documents the lives of immigrants and migrants who settled in New York from 1900 to 1930²⁹. They discuss their family relationships, social and work lives and it is revealed how people from rural areas adapted to the structured environment of the United States³⁰. In two years, from 1973 to 1975, almost 230 oral history interviews were conducted with Eastern Europeans, especially Russians, among others. They discuss the reasons for immigration, conditions during immigration and memories of Ellis Island. Other topics relate to life in the US, including education, struggles, racial and ethnic discrimination in the US and the myth around the US and how it compared to reality.

Museums nowadays have also added oral history projects to their collections. The Czech Center Museum Houston celebrates Czech culture and history and it has conducted an oral history project about Czech immigrants in the US³¹. The interviewees share the major changes and challenges they have faced after settling down in the US, most of them in Texas. Included are: interviews from survivors of the Holocaust, who immigrated in order to avoid Nazi invasion, an interview of an immigrant who shares his struggles surviving the Great Depression, and interviews of descendants³².

However, there are other collections of oral history as well, related to specific Slavic ethnicities. There are remarkable projects related to the Ukrainian ethnicity. At the University of Delaware we find the project *Ukraine in the Archives: Oral Histories of Ukrainian Immigrants*³³. More than 10 interviews of Ukrainians who made the pre-World War I emigration to the US and eventually settled in Wilmington, Delaware are held there. Two more waves of Ukrainian immigration emerged: one after World War II and one after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. During the early 20th century in Wilmington, an immigrant community called “Little Ukraine” developed, where 150 families were living and which was anchored by two Ukrainian churches and an active National Ukrainian Association³⁴. Interviewees, coming from rural families, discuss the political oppression

²⁹ Tamiment Library & R.F. Wagner Archive. *Immigration, Migration, and First Impressions of New York, New York and the United States*, digitaltamiment.hosting.nyu.edu/s/nyciloh/item-set/17 [4.06.2022].

³⁰ *Loc. cit.*

³¹ Czech Center Museum Houston. *Oral History Project*, czechcenter.org/oral-history-project [4.06.2022].

³² *Loc. cit.*

³³ University of Delaware. *Ukraine in the Archives: Oral Histories of Ukrainian Immigrants*, library.udel.edu/news/2022/03/30/ukraine-archives-oral-histories-ukrainian-immigrants [4.06.2022].

³⁴ R. J. MELVIN, *Ukraine in the Archives: Oral Histories of Ukrainian Immigrants*, library.udel.edu/news/2022/03/30/ukraine-archives-oral-histories-ukrainian-immigrants [30.03.2022].

and how they lost track of families back in their villages during the war. They talk about how they learned English in night schools and their work, even as they were already raising large families. In addition, at Seton Hall University in New Jersey the *Ukrainian Diaspora Oral History Project* has been taking place, which is an outgrowth of a 13-year collaboration between the College's Secondary Education Program and the Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University³⁵. This project documents the Ukrainian immigration process and experience of the interviewees through the prism of the deeply rooted religious mentalities of the community³⁶. Moreover, Binghamton University, the State University of New York, has conducted the *Ukrainian Oral History Project*, which consists of a collection of undergraduate student interviews with immigrants from East Central Europe, including Jewish immigrants and interviews with those who specifically identify as Russian, particularly areas from modern Ukraine³⁷. Also there is the *Ukrainian-Americans in the Midwest, 1990–1991* project, which is a collection of oral history interviews at Indiana University Bloomington examining the lives of Ukrainian-American immigrants covering the periods between 1930 and 1990³⁸. The main topics are immigration, traditions, religion and religious ceremonies, Ukrainian-American community organizations and Ukrainian-American youth organizations. Another interesting project is the *Ukrainian Famine Survivors in Minnesota oral history project collection*, which consists of 11 video recordings of interviews with survivors of *Holodomor* (the Ukrainian Famine) or their descendants, all immigrants in Minnesota³⁹.

In conclusion, the growing interest and importance of recording the life stories of first and second-generation Slavic immigrants in the United States become apparent. As the oral archives confirm, it seems that the reasons for immigration were more or less common to the interviewees. World War I and World War II, poverty, economic hardship and political turmoil, lack of jobs and lack of job opportunities, and poor living conditions were the main reasons for the search for a better future and a safer life in the United States. It is also observed that when they arrived there, they realized that the reality was far from what they imagined,

³⁵ Seton Hall University. *Ukrainian Diaspora Oral History Project*, shu.edu/education/news/oral-history-project-explores-the-ukrainian-diaspora.cfm [4.06.2022].

³⁶ *Loc. cit.*

³⁷ Binghamton University. *Ukrainian Oral History*, binghamton.edu/libraries/about/collections/oral-histories/index.html [4.06.2022].

³⁸ Indiana University Center for the Study of History and Memory. *Ukrainian-Americans in the Midwest: 1990–1991*, Indiana University Bloomington, webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/findingaids/view?doc.view=entire_text&docId=ohrc099 [4.06.2022].

³⁹ Immigration History Research Center Archives. *Ukrainian Famine Survivors in Minnesota oral history project collection*, archives.lib.umn.edu/repositories/6/resources/9184 [4.06.2022].

as they often faced hostility and suspicion due to prevailing stereotypes. However, despite the difficulties, the majority of Slavic immigrants claim that they finally managed to adapt to their new homeland, but without forgetting their roots and their respective ethnicity, preserving their traditions and culture, thus influencing the formation of modern America. These experiences are recorded with great interest by universities, institutes and independent researchers focusing on the transatlantic migration of Slavs and their settlement in the United States in the late 19th and 20th centuries. A selection of archival collections and oral history projects were presented, which investigate the causes of Slavic immigration, settlement processes in the US, expectations and frustrations, relationships and the coexistence of different ethnicities in the US. These people chronicled their life stories helping us to understand the collective past of Slavic immigrants in the United States. These collections of oral testimonies are a legacy for the future and a means of connecting with the past.

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