

**The Future of Our Past:
The Changing Face of Oral Testimony at the
Multicultural History Society of Ontario**

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Since so much of the record surrounding the story of immigration and ethnicity concerns people who have had to work long and hard for their daily bread, who may have often avoided the mainstream political process and been ignored by it, we know that the project to build a resource base would need to be free of older hierarchies of historical and archival thought which emphasized the value of written and print material over oral, of English-language material over other and of records generated by the articulate and politically active or socially prominent over humbler ethnocultural records.¹

Images of Canada: Samuel de Champlain; responsible government; William Cornelius van Horne and the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway; challenge, survival and achievements. The captains of society; the giants, good and bad, who wielded political and economic power. They made Canada. This was the stuff – the history we were taught – immortalized in a hundred social studies texts.

But there were others. The Chinese railroad navvy who stood back as van Horne rode by. The “men in sheepskin coats” from central Europe and the urban immigrant at the turn of the century, they made Canada too. Their story is also part of our history and we must now make sure that it is remembered and told.

Probably the widest-ranging effort to preserve Canadian ethnic history through the compilation of oral testimony and other primary source material has been made by the Multicultural History Society of Ontario (MHSO). The Society was formed in the autumn of 1976 under the leadership of Robert F. Harney. He and a group of fellow academics, civil servants, archivists and librarians saw the need to give every individual and group the dignity of being taken seriously as bearers of culture and history. They would acknowledge the importance of recording the stories and ways of ‘ordinary’ peoples, visibly weaving them into the seemingly pale cultural fabric of Ontario and Canada – an image with which we have been traditionally presented; an image that we, in turn, have presented to the world.

Harney and his colleagues would ask: how could one aim at reconstituting the texture of Canadian daily life without appreciating the markings that ethnocultures have left in our surroundings? How could public institutions such as archives, libraries, universities and the schools neglect the growing ethnocultural presence in Ontario culture, or boast a Canadian cosmopolitanism without being able to recognize the symbols, the voices, the sounds, the memory culture and the boundaries that fill out so much of our private and public life? Those who created a major research and archival institution from scratch, and drafted its preservation and research methodology, did so out of a profound sense of human worth and a dedication to authentic pluralism. For them it was imperative that serious ethnic studies, built on a research collection that included *all* ethnocommunity sources – with oral testimony standing first among equals – quickly emerge to strengthen the intellectual underpinnings of multiculturalism as a civic value.

The Society was born as a result of initial funding from the Government of Ontario under Premier William Davis—to his everlasting credit. This province was the first major polity to recognize the need to support multicultural research and archival work as part of the quality of life. Financial support represented the government's recognition of the changing population's right to equality of services in a multi-ethnic, multi-racial society.

A fully autonomous organization and non-profit corporation located in a converted old mansion on the campus of the University of Toronto, the MHSO and the extraordinary and innovative nature of its mandate found friends and support from many individuals and ethnocommunities interested in its work. This support would be a crucial factor in enabling the Society to build its oral testimony and material collections. The individual researcher, and the contacts that he or she could make, formed the core of the research effort in both method and ethos.²

Community researchers and archivists – paid and volunteer – came from every age group, educational level and walk of life. Qualifications required of field researchers included fluency in the language as well as familiarity with the history and present-day activities of the ethnocommunity with which they proposed to work. As well, a very high percentage had advanced degrees in history or the social sciences. They tended to be either older people who had been active in the ethnocultural life of their community, or recent university graduates whose commitment to their ethnic origins Professor Harney had revitalized and encouraged.

Contract researchers and volunteers were introduced to the Society's work and procedures through orientation sessions conducted by the staff. The sessions were designed to acquaint researchers with the method and ethic of tape recording interviews as well as gathering photographs and written materials.³

The Society prepared booklets on research procedures, most notably, *Oral Testimony and Ethnic Studies*, by Professor Harney. Published in 1977, the guide was distributed in Canada and the United States for use by a number of programs and university courses dealing with ethnocultural studies. This booklet

proved valuable as a primer. It outlined how best to take advantage of a revolutionary way of gathering material – material that would be extremely helpful in studying the sophisticated interior lives of ethnic communities. According to Harney, the guide was not intended as a full explanation or justification of so-called oral history, the oral tradition or even uses of the tape recorder. Instead, it describes “the study of ethnicity and the attempt to recreate the immigrant or ethnic *ambiente* as completely as possible.”⁴

In the guide, Harney structured his topics for discussion in the form of a simple outline, not as a questionnaire or fixed template. Based on an early east or south European immigration model, the list of topics include: migration or the coming of immigrants; settlement and neighbourhood; work and enterprise; adjustment to life in Canada (as seen through cultural adaptation and the formation of new institutions); religion and politics; as well as change and persistence in immigrant life.

By 1979, after only three years of operation, the Society had amassed thousands of hours of oral testimony in more than forty languages. It formed the basis of what was becoming the largest bank of oral testimony related to ethnicity and immigration in North America. Early notable preservation projects include historian Irving Abella's interviews with Ontario labour leaders; the Delhi (Ontario) collection of interviews with immigrant tobacco farmers from eight different ethnocommunities; the Mennonites of Kitchener-Waterloo; a collection of interviews with Japanese Canadians; and recordings of the historical memory and folkways of older Glengarry county residents, reminiscing about the Gaelic, Dutch, or Franco-Ontarian roots of the area.

In the next couple of years, operations were undertaken on a wide front. Efforts were concentrated in different areas of the province and among different language and cultural groups, although a combination of both opportunities and urgencies may have led some areas or groups to receive more initial attention than others. By 1981, as the Society balanced out its agenda, it successfully conducted research for the first time in the following communities: Austrian, Danish, Filipino, Melkite, Muslim,

Serbian, Sikh, Slovak, Sri Lankan, Turkish, Vietnamese and at the Walpole Island reserve.⁵ The work goes on.

Today, through the generosity of people, the MHSO is home to over 9,000 hours of oral testimony from over 60 different ethnic groups that now reside in Canada. The 'earliest' experience documented in the collection is from James Johnson, Sr. who immigrated to Canada in 1844. Other experiences include those that fall prior to, during and between the two World Wars; as well as those that fall during the post-war period and lead up to modern day. About 85 to 90% of the testimony at the MHSO was recorded in the adopted language, English, with the intent of making the stories more readily available to others outside the immediate community.

Oral history has become the "face" of the Society, a symbol of the Society's willingness to welcome as valid archival material the memories of the migrant, to develop serious working relationships with the diverse communities that make up Canadian society, to embody the dignity of each particular community and give its members their due as articulate historical actors.

By exploring the collection from a broad perspective, we can get a sense of how Canada, Ontario and cities like Toronto were built on an immigrant foundation. In 1885, Canada was flooded by young men – sojourners – who originally came with the idea of returning to their homelands. Many of these men would remain. Through sweat and toil, some would create the infrastructure of modern Toronto. They worked in the factories; they dug sewers; they laid street railway lines. They gave birth to the city's industrial base. This occurred at a time when pensions were rare, worker's compensation or provincial health insurance did not exist, and machinery and other forms of technology were relatively 'primitive'. New immigrants were at the mercy of big businesses. The Society has their stories.

On a more intimate level, the oral collection has the ability to capture the unique essence of individuals and community groups. As we listen to the material, it is evident that some narrators are more fluent in their adopted tongue than others, but *all* have an important contribution to make towards the whole. In fact,

when narrators started to look back at their testimonies, they could not believe the depth or substance of the material that they had shared. They came to realize how 'extraordinary' they really were. They began to see the significance of the lives that they had lived.

Through the collection, we have access to an insider's perspective on history. In examining this history from the 'bottom up', we learn how people saw themselves: their countrymen and women; the 'promised land'; how they felt about one another, including their prejudices and misunderstandings; and how they felt about their own ethnic group and other ethnic groups. These stories contain universal themes – providing for one's family, putting a roof over one's head, as well as leisure. They show how people developed their psychic maps and how they evolved. They truly demonstrate that these so-called 'ordinary' folk were indeed historical actors – intelligent, reflective and not illiterate in their own languages. In this way oral testimony 'gives voice to the voiceless' and does away with the idea that ordinary people are dumb or mute.

The collection illustrates that immigrant ethnic groups are not static bodies. They are diverse and changing. The social roles of people as men and women; labourers, homemakers and professionals; husband and wife; mothers and fathers; sisters and brothers, etc., each carry with them their own perspectives. The oral testimony amassed at the MHSO manages to bring these perspectives to light. It brings us closer to the 'truth', allowing for a richer, more complex interpretation of history.

The oral testimony at the MHSO acts as a form of 'checks and balances' to mainstream, written material. The insider's perspective or viewpoint that is provided by the recordings effectively acts as an antidote to information found in official records. It allows the critical consumer of history to 'take off the blinders', so to speak. Oral testimony raises new ways of reinterpreting these mainstream sources, calling us to look at them again.

According to Harney, the Society's oral testimony collection was to be viewed "as part of a whole deposit of ethnic and immigration sources...."⁶ Successful interviews conducted by

researchers at the Society actually served to create the conditions whereby additional sources of ethnic history could be gathered. As a result, two of the Society's three floors and basement eventually were stuffed with the other kinds of raw data. There, you could read the diary of a turn-of-the century Jewish immigrant or a handwritten Finnish newspaper, a sample of the "fist" press that circulated over fifty years ago.⁷ Other sources included: personal records, such as scrapbooks, diaries and memoirs; family photographs and documents in the form of passports, vaccination certificates and membership cards; records of religious institutions, social clubs, mutual aid societies and political organizations consisting of meeting minutes and registers (i.e., baptism, wedding and funeral); financial statements; commemorative programmes; lists of members; conference records; news releases; buttons; insignia; logos; and other visual symbols. These are but the obvious materials.⁸

This evidence demonstrated that early ethnic communities had their own world of letters; there was a life of the mind where people reflected on their own experiences. Some members of these communities had gone to city archives and institutions to give them the documents they had created but their offerings were rejected. Those institutions' loss was the Society's gain.

LOG FORMS/ORIGINAL CATALOGUE: The Society devised an initial means of organizing its wealth of materials. This would form the basis of its cataloguing system. Identification forms provided basic information on all persons who donated or loaned written, photographic, and oral materials to the Society. Material submission reports accounted for and identified all forms of written materials and photographs, while interview log forms accompanied all submissions of taped interviews. Information contained on the form included the interviewee's name, the date on which the interview was recorded; the actual recorded time of the interview, as well as the place including the full street address and the name of the city or town and location such as the interviewee's home or office where the interview was conducted. Researchers were also required to give the language that the interviewee used

throughout the recorded interview (noting occasional phrases or sentences in another language), the number of tapes used or begun in the interview, and listed the names of any other persons who were present during the interview (including their relationship to the interviewer or the interviewee). Finally, they summarized what the interviewee discussed, in the order it was discussed.⁹

TRANSCRIPTIONS: While cassette recordings were transferred to reel-to-reel tapes for preservation, transcriptions were frowned upon. According to Harney:

*The study of ethnicity is at its best when it crosses disciplines. The tape recorder may gather useful material for a linguist, ethnographer, and folklorist, and transcribing tapes would destroy large parts of the record for them. In the future, historians who understand ethnicity as historical process will borrow heavily from those disciplines, and so transcriptions, like editing, seems to us a misuse of oral testimony.*¹⁰

Release forms protected the donors and addressed the privacy and access concerns of the individuals involved. Then, as now, the vast majority of oral testimony and material holdings has been deemed unrestricted, thereby allowing any person or group to look at, cite, and quote from part or all of the material.¹¹

Along with the continuing effort to collect sources, the MHSO would soon begin to carry out its mandate to enhance learning and interest in ethnic and immigration studies through a variety of publications including *Polyphony*, the Society's bulletin; scholarly occasional papers, conference proceedings, and monographs; memoirs and autobiographies.

The MHSO also put the *story* back into *history* through its use of oral testimony in its changing exhibitions by and about Canada's diverse communities. Exhibit work began with the production of historical display panels and posters for multicultural occasions such as *Caravan* in Toronto. Beginning in 1989, the

Society began to produce and circulate its own exhibits such as *Growing Cultures*; *Many Rivers to Cross: 400 Years of African Canadian History*; and, most recently, *Reflections: Images of Chinese Women in Canada* which now enjoy a worldwide audience.

The role of the MHSO as a public and civil institution in a pluralistic landscape, and the transformation of oral history and other material collections from sources of knowledge and understanding, to serving cultural integrity and public life would take a quantum leap in the digital age. Now at the click of a button, students and researchers of all ages from across Canada and around the world can come to the Society and move beyond the borders and boundaries of the traditional history and social science curricula. They can learn of the many heritages which contribute to our quality of life by entering a virtual world, past and present, that isn't defined by borders or mountains.

The year 1999 marked the launch of the *Global Gathering Place*, a visionary website and electronic learning programme created jointly by the MHSO and the Centre for Instructional Development (CITD) at the University of Toronto at Scarborough. Allowing users to access the wealth of information and resources housed at the Society, students from grades 7 to 12, as well as members of the general public, can explore issues of identity, social inclusiveness, discrimination, citizenship, human rights and inter-group relations.

Project offspring would include the *Inspector Relic* workshops, facilitated by Society volunteers and local elementary school teachers, which used the rich oral history, photographic and documentary resources contained in the MHSO library and archives to make history come alive. Students were presented with artifacts from the past and were asked specific questions designed to guide them through the process of historical reconstruction and interpretation. The goal of the activity was to allow students to glean the diverse experiences of real people through their own voices.

In the spring of 2001, a *Polyphony* digital website was produced with funds from Industry Canada. This award-winning website provides a great introduction to the roots of Ontario's

cultural and human variety through a plethora of articles, photographs and audio clips selected from the Society's bulletin and resource centre holdings.

That same year, the Ontario Trillium Foundation awarded the MHSO a generous grant to establish an innovative oral history museum and arts center designed to encourage meaningful intergenerational and cross-cultural relationships through the use of tools such as listening, speaking, social interaction and engagement. The museum will serve to fill the need of educators, representatives of ethnocultural organizations and senior citizen groups for services and tools to assist them in addressing diversity issues in their schools and communities; address the gap in high-quality resource materials, programming and experimental learning opportunities that fully engage children and youth, thereby helping to fulfill the requirements of Ontario's new social studies and history curricula; produce students at the elementary and secondary school level, in a period of globalization, who are savvy and compassionate, interested and aware of the lives of people who are different from themselves; provide a timely, legitimate and effective way to reach out and serve First Nation and Aboriginal communities that depend strongly on oral traditions as essential communication and community-building tools; and help to alleviate some of the challenges of diversity such as community isolation and interethnic friction by promoting cooperation and social cohesion.

To create an appealing and effective environment, the MHSO will draw on innovative exhibition design and interactive technology. Five computer kiosks equipped with interactive software will enable visitors to access, engage with, and generate welcome additions to the Society's sound archives.

Not willing to rest solely on its technological laurels, the Museum will also serve as a venue for workshops, seminars, storytelling sessions, presentations, concerts and lectures. As well, more traditional display materials that 'speak to the eye', such as archival photographs with text, will also be installed in the space.

Finally, the planned re-formatting and digitizing of the MHSO audio collection will ensure cost-effective portability and the quality and longevity of an irreplaceable treasure house of the spoken word.

Oral testimony has stood at the center of the Society's refinement of direction and mandate. It has helped to amend or expand programs which allowed the MSHO to crystallize our vision in which all citizens, and their descendants, have an appreciation of our shared histories and access to the cultural products of all our peoples from this time forward.

Notes

- 1 Robert F. Harney, "A History of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario," *Polyphony* 9.1 (1987): 1.
- 2 Harney, *Polyphony* 8. See also: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, *Annual Report 1976-1977* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1977) chap. 2 passim.
- 3 Robert F. Harney, *Oral Testimony and Ethnic Studies* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, ca.1977) 1-5.
- 4 Harney, *Oral Testimony and Ethnic Studies* 2-3.
- 5 Multicultural History Society of Ontario, *Annual Report 1980-1981* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1981) chaps. 3 and 4 passim.
- 6 Harney, *Oral Testimony and Ethnic Studies* 5.
- 7 Multicultural History Society of Ontario, *Annual Report 1976-1977* chap. 3 passim.
- 8 Harney, *Oral Testimony and Ethnic Studies* 6-11.
- 9 Multicultural History Society of Ontario, *Research Procedures* (Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, ca.1977).
- 10 Harney, *Oral Testimony and Ethnic Studies* 5.
- 11 Multicultural History Society of Ontario, *Research Procedures*.