

What Makes Oral History Different

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The keynote address of the thirty-eighth annual conference of the AIHA was delivered by Alessandro Portelli on November 4, 2005. Not only did Portelli knowledgeably address the topics of oral history and oral culture, given his scholarly experience in these fields, he was also able to beautifully practice what he preaches, that is, narrate orally in a story-telling mode that captivated the audience. What follows is Alessandro Portelli's keynote address, transcribed by the speaker himself.

Back in 1960–61, I was an American Field Service foreign exchange student at Westchester High School here in Los Angeles—which still exists, although it has been almost swallowed up by the airport. And I had this wonderful experience of being an Italian in Los Angeles. Part of this was listening to the Italian radio station from “*la bellissima città di San Pedro*” on Sundays. Every Italian boy lives the day of Sunday in anxiety, waiting for the soccer results. The great privilege here was that, thanks to the time difference, by 10:00 a.m. I’d know the scores—and my Sunday anxiety was replaced by Sunday despair.

I came here prepared to give a paper basically on methodology; however, after hearing some of the workshops yesterday, I thought that something more narrative, with more “history” in it, might be a better idea. I also feel that somehow the historicity of contemporary Italy needs to be underlined at a conference like this. Basically, the ideas that I was going to present in the methodological paper were that oral history is a work of relationships; in the first place, a relationship between the past and the present, an effort to establish, through memory and narrative, what the past means to the present; then, a relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, and between the oral form of the narrative and the written or audiovisual form of the historian’s product. So what I would like to do is use these ideas as a template to talk about what is, by now, the center of my research, my thinking, and my feelings: the massacre at the Fosse Ardeatine in Rome.

On March 24, 1944, the Nazis, who had been occupying Rome since September 1943, killed 335 men in an abandoned quarry on the via Ardeatina. This act was ostensibly a reprisal for a partisan attack that had taken place the day before in a street in the center of Rome, via Rasella, when sixteen partisans attacked a unit of 150 Nazi policemen attached to the SS. The attack resulted in no partisan casualties and the death of thirty-three Nazi policemen. The retaliation was at the ratio of ten Italians for one German, and due to some confusion among the German police who were in charge of the action, the victims turned out to be 335.

This episode is still a very raw wound in the city's memory. If you mention the Fosse Ardeatine to anybody in Rome, especially if they or their family were there during the war, emotions will flare high. Why is this so? It has to do with meaning, with the construction of meaning. In terms of the number of victims, the Fosse Ardeatine wasn't the worst massacre that took place during the war. One, of course, thinks of the Shoah, of the thirty thousand Jews killed in the Babi Yar ravine in Kiev, of the horrors of Nanking, of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In Italy, about five hundred people were massacred by the Nazis in Marzabotto and in Sant'Anna di Stazzema. Fifteen thousand civilians were slaughtered in over six hundred mass killings by the German occupying forces in Italy from 1943 to 1944. In Rome, almost two thousand Jews were deported and very few returned; but the highest number of casualties was caused by the Allied air raids: more than eighteen hundred people were killed on the first day of bombing alone, July 19, 1943.

So, why is it that this memory is so poignant, so charged with meaning and emotion? One of the things that make oral history different is that while more conventional history is primarily interested in what happened—why was the massacre carried out, in what way, whose responsibility is it, what was its place in the overall military scenario of the war and of the Resistance—oral history also asks another question: what does it mean?

I will try to outline some of the factors that make this episode so charged with meaning. In the first place, it has to do with the place where it happened: this was the only major Nazi massacre that was perpetrated in the middle of a big western European metropolis. Most Nazi mass killings took place in villages or rural areas, where the population (and therefore the demography of the victims) was relatively homogeneous. At the Fosse Ardeatine, the victims were a cross-section of the complex demography of a major Western city. If you look at their religion, for instance, the slaughter included one Catholic priest, many Catholics, but also Freemasons and atheists. It was probably the only mass murder in which Jews and non-Jews were killed together. Or politics: the victims range from people who were not political and were picked up at random to guerrilla fighters who had been active in the Resistance, and from conservatives to Communists, with everything in between. They came from all neighborhoods, from all walks of life. Wherever you go in Rome, if you look at the walls, you're bound to find some plaque that commemorates someone from that part of the city who was killed at the Fosse Ardeatine. And they were lawyers and waiters, Jewish peddlers and Piedmontese aristocrats, students and railroad workers, and carpenters and teachers. Also, because Rome was the capital, the victims came from throughout the nation. I have discussed this event all over Italy, from the southern tip of Santa

Maria di Leuca to the northwestern border of Trieste, to the center of Sardinia, and in all these places they remembered some local person who had been killed at the Fosse Ardeatine in Rome. Thus, while most other massacres are primarily a local tragedy, the Fosse Ardeatine somehow gathers all of Italy into one shared act of violence. This demographic factor is reinforced, of course, by the fact that, as the capital, Rome represents the country as a whole also symbolically. Besides, Rome is also the capital of the Catholic Church, which enhances its symbolic meaning. (In fact, one of the huge questions—into which I will not go—is, what role did the Catholic Church play in that context?)

The Fosse Ardeatine is now one of the most beautiful, moving modern monuments in Rome. But if you go, you will see that the *fosse*—ditches—are in fact tunnels that were dug in order to extract the materials for the building boom of the 1880s, when the new capital was expanding to accommodate the influx of people that were attracted there from all over Italy. So, I think of those tunnels, those holes, as a funnel into which the whole history of the city was poured on that day in 1944 and out of which other stories radiated afterwards.

Some examples. The name of the man who lit the fuse and started the battle at via Rasella is Rosario Bentivegna. He was named after his grandfather, an architect from Palermo who came to Rome in 1870, when the city became the capital, and designed, among other things, via Veneto—the street celebrated in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*. Rosario Bentivegna's grandfather, in turn, was the son of Giovanni Bentivegna, who was executed in Palermo in 1856 for leading an aborted democratic insurrection. Through him and other protagonists, then, the history of via Rasella and the Fosse Ardeatine links up with the whole of Italian history, beginning with the struggle for independence in the Risorgimento.

Another example: Righetto Ferola. He was a blacksmith in Trastevere, which, before it became so gentrified, was a popular neighborhood of artisans and workers. Righetto Ferola manufactured some of the most powerful weapons of the Resistance in Rome—the device that Harlan County coal miners call *bobjacks*, or, as they call them in Rome, "*chiodi a quattro punte*," four-pronged nails: two nails welded together crossways and sharpened at both ends, so that no matter how you drop it, there is always one sharp prong sticking up. The partisans would strew them on the roads, and tear the tires of German convoys on their way to Anzio and Cassino, stopping supplies and reinforcements to the front (and making the immobilized trucks an easy target for Allied planes). Righetto Ferola was one of four children of Giovanni Ferola. Giovanni Ferola was a student in the Trastevere seminar in the 1860s: that was the only way a young man from a poor family could get an education. Giovanni Ferola ran away from the seminar, joined Garibaldi, who was then trying to liberate Rome from the Pope's domain, and later had four children. Two died in World War II, one was beaten to death by the Fascists in the 1920s, and the fourth, Righetto, died at the Fosse Ardeatine.

Let me tell you how I found Righetto Ferola's daughters. Trastevere, his old neighbourhood, had a Republican tradition going back to the battles fought by Garibaldi in 1849, in defense of the Roman Republic, on the Gianicolo hill. So when I wanted to find his family, I used the advanced anthropological technique of looking up "Ferola" in the phone book. There were four Ferolas, but one of

them was named Anita, and Anita was Garibaldi's wife. And indeed, Anita Ferola turned out to be Righetto's daughter. Again, contemporary identities are rooted in a century-old history of the city. There are hundreds of such stories around the Fosse Ardeatine, so that if you take the stories of these families and these people, you have a cross-section of the history of Rome itself. This is one of the reasons why this massacre is so significant. It wasn't only one group of people, one neighborhood. It's the whole city, which represents the whole country.

Another reason why it is so meaningful is the way in which it was carried out. If you read most of the commemorative plaques on the walls of Rome, they say that such-and-such a man was "barbarously" murdered by the Nazis, or some such formula. In fact, they were not *barbarously* murdered at all: it was a very civilized massacre. It could not have been carried out without the modern state, without the logistics, without the archives, without Western civilization. They had to have records to draw the lists of what they called "death candidates." They had to have trucks to take them to the place of the execution. They had to have places of detention, the central jail at Regina Coeli and the Nazi prison and torture chamber at via Tasso, from which they picked out the victims. They had to have an established procedure and chain of command in order to kill them all in an orderly manner. The reason they used the caves was that they were looking for a natural burial chamber, where they wouldn't have to dig a hole big enough to contain 335 bodies and where they could hide their victims under the ground as soon as the deed was accomplished. They took the victims in groups of five into the tunnels, forced them to kneel down, and shot them in the back of the head with a modern machine gun. The tunnels were dark and narrow, and after a while, the incoming victims had to kneel on the bodies of those who had been killed before them. At one point some of the executioners became disturbed, many of them had never killed before, so they had to be given a sip of brandy. One officer said he couldn't go on, so the chief commander, Colonel Herbert Kappler, took him kindly under his arm, comforted him, took him back into the cave and gave the paternal good example by shooting one man. As an act of respect, Kappler later claimed, the orders were not to touch the victims' heads with the barrel of the gun, so as not to disfigure them. Someone had suggested calling in a priest to comfort them (no one mentioned a rabbi), but they decided against it because, as Colonel Kappler said later in court, it would have been unkind to interrupt the victims as they were making their last confessions. All in all, a very humanitarian massacre. Very civilized.

This means that we, our culture, our Western tradition, are involved. It was not a savage act. The savages do it differently. This was us. And the question that the massacre generates is: Who are we? What kind of civilization is ours?

Third, and perhaps the most important reason why this episode is charged with meaning, is the way it has been remembered. In oral history, in fact, we do not simply reconstruct the history of an event but also the history of its memory, the ways in which it grows, changes, and operates in the time between then and now. At the center of this story lies a false memory. Let me illustrate it with a little anecdote.

After I wrote my book on the Fosse Ardeatine, I was short-listed for the Viareggio Book Prize. When the phone call came to announce that I had gotten it, my wife was at the hairdresser's, and I called her with the news. She must have looked

pleased, because the people in the shop asked her what was the good news, and she explained that her husband had gotten a prize for a book on the Fosse Ardeatine. The lady sitting next to her exploded: “I know all about it. The Germans posted bills all over the city asking the perpetrators of the attack in via Rasella to deliver themselves in order to avoid the retaliation; those cowardly Communist partisans didn’t turn themselves in, and the Germans went on with the killing of the hostages. It was the partisans’ fault.” This is the dominant narrative, the common-sense story: the partisans are to be blamed because they refused to sacrifice themselves in order to save the hostages. The fact is it did not happen that way. The Germans proceeded immediately to plan the massacre: they posted no bills, made no appeals, hardly even looked for the “perpetrators.” We have it from the best authority, General Kesselring, the commander of the Fourteenth German Army on the Rome front. While he was on trial for war crimes, the Allied prosecutor asked him whether they had posted bills asking the partisans to turn themselves in, and he said that on retrospect it might have been a good idea, but it didn’t occur to them then.

So my wife told this lady that I had just written a four-hundred-page book that showed that this never happened, and the lady replied: “If he had talked to me, he wouldn’t have written that book.” One reason why this narrative has been able to root itself in popular memory is that historians only dealt with the mechanics of what happened and never with the memory. Now, the mechanics were just too easy, so easy that they would hardly justify the writing of an academic essay; and in fact there is no academic historiography of the Fosse Ardeatine. What is not easy is the memory—but until very recently, memory, and especially false memory, has been beneath the attention of historians. So that, in the absence of competent, credible historical writing, the popular press and reactionary gossip have gone on unchecked, spreading the false narrative of partisan responsibility.

This story has also gained credibility because of the widespread belief that there was an automatic relationship between the partisan attack and the Nazi retaliation (the so-called “ten-Italians-to-one-German law”). Once again, it was not so. There had been plenty of partisan attacks, and German casualties in Rome, before via Rasella. However, the Nazis had chosen not to publicize the fact by carrying out public retaliations. Had they done so, they would have had to admit that they could be attacked and killed, whereas the myth of their invincibility and invulnerability was essential to keeping the city under control. Via Rasella, however, could not be ignored: it was a pitched battle in the middle of the day, in the center of Rome, in which the Nazis were soundly defeated. They had to act quickly to restore their psychological domination over the city. Capturing the “perpetrators” was never the priority. What counted was terrorizing Rome with a swift and merciless retaliation to show that they could not be touched.

Thus, while popular memory images an automatic, undivided sequence of cause and effect, the attack and the retaliation were in fact *two* distinct events. There was no such thing as the ten-to-one law. In fact, Hitler’s orders were to deport ten thousand people and blow up the center of Rome. When the local Nazi commanders objected (yes, one *could* discuss Hitler’s orders!) that in order to do so they would have had to remove troops out of the Cassino and Anzio front, and that after all it was a pity to destroy such a historic city as Rome, Hitler first ordered

a fifty-to-one retaliation, then all but forgot about the matter. The Nazi officials on the scene concluded that a ten-to-one ratio was logistically feasible (and it was the first time that it was formally applied in Italy). Thus, in the interval between the partisan attack and the Nazi reprisal there was a debate, a negotiation, and a political and military decision. There was nothing automatic about the massacre. However, claiming that the sequence was automatic is functional to blaming the partisans, claiming not only that they should have known that this was the inevitable consequence of their action, and even that they did it on purpose to provoke the massacre, so that the city would rebel or, alternatively, so that the Germans would execute non-Communist prisoners and thus clear the way for Communist hegemony over the Resistance and postwar Italy. (Incidentally, there were over eighty Communists among those killed at the Fosse Ardeatine.)

This ideological construct is sustained by an imagined politics of time. The one part of Hitler's order that was executed to the letter was that the reprisal should be carried out within twenty-four hours. In fact, it was only twenty-two hours between the partisan attack (shortly before 4:00 p.m.) and the beginning of the slaughter at the Fosse Ardeatine (at 2:00 p.m. the next day). However, if one asks most people how long was it between via Rasella and the Fosse, answers range from three days (on the model of Christ's passion, I believe) to six months. This is necessary so that one can imagine that the Nazis had time either to ask the partisans to deliver themselves or to seek them out—and to imagine that the partisans had the time and the opportunity to save the hostages by delivering themselves.

The power of this narrative, furthermore, lies in the fact that it is very credible, that it makes a lot of sense: the cause-and-effect sequence, even the symmetrical "poetics" of the ten-to-one ratio (would it be as effective if it had been, say, thirteen to two or seventeen to four?), the powerful narrative effect of a story that begins with an explosion and ends with the silence of death, the myth of Rome as an "open city" that was at peace before the via Rasella episode (which, in fact, was only one of over forty partisan actions resulting in German casualties).

The fascinating thing about mythic imagination is that it cannot be influenced by information. As the lady at the hairdresser's demonstrates, no scholarly research can erode a firmly held ideological need to blame the freedom fighters for a massacre carried out by an occupying army. Let me reconstruct an imaginary but typical conversation. The person says that the partisans were warned that they should turn themselves in to avoid the massacre. I inform him that they were never warned, that there was no precedent, that there was no time, that the Nazis only released the news of the attack after the massacre had been carried out. And then he says, all right, but they should have turned themselves in *anyway*, even if they had not been asked. I object that this would be an odd, self-defeating way of waging a war; and besides, the orders were never to do so, even if requested, because under torture one might expose the whole Resistance underground. All right, says he—they should not have attacked the Germans in the first place. I object: how can you fight a war of liberation without attacking the occupying army? And the final, if often unspoken answer is: the whole Resistance was a mistake and a crime. This is the core of the unshakeable belief that the interchangeable mythic narratives are created to support: Italians should not have fought a war of resistance against the

Nazis. And since the standard democratic narrative is that Italian democracy was generated by the Resistance, the ultimate meaning of the myth is a rejection of the foundations of Italian democracy as we know it—a rejection that has become quite outspoken after Berlusconi's advent on the political scene in the mid-1990s.

The memory of the Fosse Ardeatine as part of the birth of democracy is staged every year on the anniversary of the massacre, when the President, the Mayor, and all the authorities, attend the celebrations. However, the families of the survivors always come out of the ceremony upset. A commemoration is the search for a unitary meaning, but there is no way you can generate a unitary meaning that will recognize all the different identities and histories of these men: are they all patriots, all martyrs, all partisans, all heroes, all innocents (or, as in some widespread false memories, all Communists, all Jews, all criminals out of jail)? Indeed, in the mid-1960s the families asked the authorities to stop making speeches, to stop trying to impose an interpretation or a meaning. Just say a prayer, read the names—which is a very moving ritual—but don't say anything, because whatever you say is bound to be wrong, at least for some of us.

What is at play here is the tension between private and public memory. For instance, Righetto Ferola's daughters told me, "We never say, 'We're going to the Fosse Ardeatine.' We always say, 'We're going to take some flowers to Daddy's grave.'" The Fosse Ardeatine is both a monument and a cemetery. The graves are there, in an enormous room, three hundred and thirty-five concrete graves beneath a dark concrete ceiling, a metaphor for the darkness in which they were killed, only relieved by a thin slice of daylight at the sides. And the tension is not only between public and private memory but also about *whose* private memory. In fact, the only thing one could say that is shared by all the victims is that they were all men. This is another sign of the fact that it was a civilized, orderly massacre: in the savage mass murders at Sant'Anna di Stazzema or Marzabotto, the Nazis killed and burned everything in sight: women, children, and old men. But here, or in other cases like Civitella in Tuscany, they took time to organize the slaughter and generally chose to kill only men. Which means that this is a women's memory, that it was women—wives, mothers—who lived to tell the tale, to mourn, and to struggle for survival. Of course, the victims also had fathers, but the fathers were powerless. They felt that they had failed to protect their children, that they had lost the continuity of their lineage. Some cherished dreams of revenge, others were sunk into despair. So it was women who were left to deal with reality.

One of Ferola's daughters told me that for a number of years, a special free bus line ran on Sundays from the Coliseum to the Fosse Ardeatine, for the families. And on the bus you could hear mothers and wives arguing over whose loss was more painful. "And we, the children," she said, "heard and thought, what about the pain of the children?" Women and children had to deal with the loss in their own way. Children grew up playing on the space in front of the caves, while their mothers were inside putting flowers on the graves or trying to identify the bodies. Young brides, Ferola's daughter recalled, would not go to the Pincio to be photographed in their wedding dress; rather, they'd go to the Fosse Ardeatine to lay their bouquet on their fathers' graves. And then, there were all these mothers and wives, wearing the customary heavy mourning black—remember, this is 1945, '46, '47; most

women didn't work outside the home, had no job training, didn't much venture into public space.

So those that didn't have families to rely on, and they were the majority, had to go to work, and the state assisted them by placing them in unskilled jobs in the public sector—hospitals, cleaning services, the state printing office, or the state tobacco plant. These were low-paying jobs, and often they had to take two or three jobs to make ends meet for their big families.

One woman, Gabriella Polli, recalled that her mother worked cleaning offices in the morning, as a phone operator at a hospital at night, and came home in the afternoon to take care of her four daughters. "And we never had holes in our socks, we were always clean and decent," she said. And she told me, "Later, must have been around '64, '65, one day I called my mother on the phone, and asked, mom, how are you? And she said, 'I'm crying.' 'Crying? For what?' 'For your father.' 'Now?' 'I never had time before, with work and with raising you girls. Now that I'm retired, finally I have the time to mourn for my husband.'"

Gabriella Polli also has another story. One day her grandmother went down to the grocery store to buy some bread—goods were still rationed, and there were long lines in the stores. But she came back in a few minutes, very pleased: the owner, she said, had kindly told her to step in front of the line and served her first. And her mother said, "Don't you realize why? It's because he didn't want you in there. He wanted to get rid of you as soon as he could."

There was much solidarity in Rome toward the families of the victims of the Fosse Ardeatine—as long as they stayed in their place, in the spaces reserved for mourning and grief. But these women in black, in the streets, in the stores, in the offices, were a reminder of death to a city that was anxiously trying to go back to life after years of death and oppression. So they were pitied but were not always welcome. And she explains it all with a wonderful metaphor: "Ours," she says, "was a strange grief. It was a grief that was washed, ironed, folded, and put away in a drawer. We were never able," she says ironically, "to *enjoy* our grief."

The massacre took place on March 24. The Allies entered Rome on June 6, and immediately, the very next day, thousands of people flocked to the Fosse Ardeatine. The commander of the Allied forces in occupied or liberated Rome had a bright idea: "These victims are already under the ground; let's build a monument on top of the place to commemorate them."

But the women reacted. A group of them went to the Allied general and said, "No, we want to be able to recognize them; we want to be able to grieve over their bodies, to be sure that they are there."

There is a difference between putting someone under the earth and *burying* him: A burial is not just a way of disposing of a body; it is a ceremony, a ritual, which, as the great Italian ethnologist Ernesto de Martino says in his book on *Morte e pianto rituale*, turns the loss into value, pain into meaning. So in order to bury these people they had to unbury them first.

This was one of the most excruciating moments in the whole story. These bodies had been piled on top of one another under the ground for months, and when pathologist Attilio Ascarelli and his team began to exhume them, in the middle of the hot Roman summer, the condition in which they were found was indescribable.

And women and children had to confront these remains to identify them—on the basis of a broken tooth, of a piece of cloth, of the content of their pockets.

Finally, some thoughts on what oral history does in these contexts. I try to avoid the word “testimony,” which many of us use, and it’s quite all right, but I tend to avoid it because basically testimony is an act of witnessing about something the person has seen, not something that the person has done or experienced in the first person. In oral history, however, the narrator is the protagonist, the center of the tale. The reason I got involved in this project was that in 1996 one of the perpetrators of the massacre was found in Argentina, extradited to Italy, and put on trial. And the press talked about the survivors in patronizing terms: these poor suffering people, after all these years, still fainting, still crying, still acting as if it had just happened. So the question I asked was, how did these people survive, how did they lead a normal life, how were they able to act as citizens, as working people, all these years, with this open wound inside them? While history was interested in the dramatic events of March 1944, I was interested in the stories that radiated out of them; I was interested in the dead, but also in the lives of the survivors, in the stories that radiated *out* of the funnel of the Ardeatine Caves.

Some of them had testified in court or had been interviewed before. But they were always asked to give testimony about the historic event, to talk about what happened to their fathers or their husbands or their sons on March 24, 1944. The courts and the media were not interested in *them*, but in those historic events. However, you cannot do oral history unless your interest is focused on the person with whom you are talking. What I wanted to know was not just what they had seen in 1944 but what their lives had been like since then—because oral history always leads us from the past to the present. And they had stories that they might have shared among themselves but that never made it into the history books or the media, stories of things that happened to them that no one asked them about and that often they didn’t even realize were of historical significance because they had grown to believe that their own lives were not, *per se*, historically significant.

So one of the things I often did was, when I had asked all the questions I could think of, and the interviewee had told all the stories she thought were worth telling, I would always let the tape run on and just chat. This is when the most unexpected stories are told, the stories that are not part of the historian’s agenda or the narrator’s public presentation. So, I was talking to Ada Pignotti, one of the great storytellers in the group, who had told the story of the Fosse Ardeatine countless times, in schools or in media interviews. She had been married six months when her husband was killed. “Since then,” she said, “the only men who have come into my house are the doctor and the priest.” We did the interview (in a public place): the questions were asked, the stories were told, and the tape kept running as we chatted. And what she talked about was what old people will talk about—her ailments, her pension, her complaint that less deserving or needy people had got better pensions than she did—“after all I went through to get that pension!” So I asked her, what did you go through? And she described the trail she traveled from office to office, the stairs she climbed, the waiting, the desks she had to face, the humiliations, and all the while I was thinking of Hamlet’s “arrogance of office.”

And then she added, “And every place I went, even later, in the offices where I worked, they always assumed you were at their disposal.” “What do you mean, madam?” “I mean what you think I mean.” To me, this was perhaps the most painful experience in the whole project, because it revealed the indignities at the roots of my own male culture, the assumption that widows were fair game, women without a man, unprotected, “experienced,” and “safe.” Now, the question always asked of oral history is, how do you generalize from one person’s story? You need confirmation from other sources, from other people. On the other hand, you can’t very well go around asking old ladies, “Were you sexually harassed in the 1940s?” But there are ways. An interview is not a question-and-answer session; rather, it is the opening of a narrative space, which the interviewer’s presence and questions or comments encourage the interviewee to explore and navigate. So I would make generic comments, such as “It must have been a difficult time, especially for a young woman,” and they would immediately pick up the hint and go right into the same kind of narratives.

Now, these ladies didn’t have a word for “sexual harassment.” With her third-grade education, Ada Pignotti thought that “history,” as defined in school, was only what happened to her husband and not to her. She was not aware that there were now such things as gender history, social history, the history of sexuality—indeed oral history—and that what she went through had historical significance in itself. This, after all, is another function of oral history: to bring into the vision of history aspects of experience that have been ignored and left out, and at the same time to challenge and stimulate the historical self-awareness of the people we interview.