

***Oral Sources and Archives:
Projects, Personal Histories, Proficiency and Passion***
Review by Nadia Truglia

I believe that the palpable enthusiasm among scholars of Human Sciences who met in Poggibonsi (SI) on the 20th-21st April was due in part to the powerful title of the book that was presented at the conference¹ setting the tone for the entire event. **“I custodi delle voci”** (ALLEGATO 1) is a meaningful title for all who are interested in oral and intangible heritage: from academics who work with oral sources to scholars who resist the practice of the throwaway and who, having discovered, studied and written about the “voices”, have subsequently become their loving guardians.

A pressing pace marked the day and a half of work. The presenters of the afternoon of the 20th were the curators of the book, local administrators (Commune of Poggibonsi and Region Tuscany) and various representatives of Oral Archives Tuscany All were united by their firm conviction that collecting, preserving and valorizing of oral sources is not only advisable but highly desirable because of their powerful cultural and social value. To this end, Pietro Clemente² as well as Gian Bruno Ravenni³ strongly affirmed the need for serious and constant commitment from local Administrations in the stewardship of archives, museums and libraries, all of which are now recognized by the Code for Cultural Assets and the scientific community as effective instruments of cultural policy and social inclusion.

Such considerations on cultural policies that concern (or should concern) oral sources archives framed the following animated discussion, coordinated by Natalia Cangi of the *Archivio Diaristico Nazionale di Pieve S. Stefano* (Arezzo) with the participation of the representatives (founders or directors) of some of the most important oral archives in Tuscany. The various testimonies (space allows me to cite only a few examples) portrayed the current situation of oral archives by describing the “life story” of each one. Thus, Francesco’s intervention (the people of Nomadelfia Archives prefer to use their first names) drew the participants’ attention to an impressive archives for the documentation of the religious community founded by Don Zeno, and emphasized the value of its management. Ivan Della Mea, *Istituto Ernesto de Martino*, went over the past of this memorable archives (for oral history and Italian anthropology) from the 1960s up to now, describing an almost mythic, voluntary migration towards the South (from Milan to Sesto Fiorentino). He added that despite titanic efforts to carry on the collection work of founder Gianni Bosio, this archives is currently at risk of being closed down and accused the society of careless naivety.

¹ The conference ““Le fonti orali. Archivi, storie, passioni, competenze, progetti” was organized by IDAST (Ethno-anthropologic and oral history initiatives in Tuscany) and SIMBDEA (Italian society for museography and ethno-anthropologic goods) with the collaboration of the Commune of Poggibonsi.

² Promoter of the conference, professor of Cultural Anthropology at Florence University and chairman of the associations IDAST and SIMBDEA.

³ Coordinator of Culture Area of the General Management for training policies, cultural assets and activities of the Region Tuscany.

Equally welcome were the contributions of collectors who operate on a smaller scale, like Mario Catastini. A former elementary school teacher, he has collected 1091 audio records on the life of his same village: births, funerals, market purchases and fights etc, from 1961 up to now. It is a unique archives that grew out of a strong desire for human contact: "...I bought the recorder to preserve the voices of my parents, to make them eternal, to always have them with me, and with the *Geloso* (a recording device named after its inventor) I worked this miracle because I could hide it and its microphone was extremely sensitive. I would put it under the table and then deliberately set them off, which was quite easy. It was enough to mention that my dad had come home later because he had probably stopped at the local inn. So they would start to quarrel and it was very satisfying for me. In the beginning, I bought it only as an instrument to preserve my parents' and my other relatives' voice [...] it wasn't until the 1970s, when I started to visit current historical archives, that I used my recorder as an essential instrument to reconstruct the identity of the communities where I worked as a teacher."

Oral archives usually collect materials produced, for the most part, by historians and anthropologists during their field research. The morning of the 21st, began with a reflection on the research carefully observing the dialogue between the researcher and the interviewee. Elena Bachiddu elaborated on the significant experience of the most important magazine in our field, *Lares* (a four-monthly magazine of anthropologic studies) and of her experiments in transcribing oral sources onto paper. Valentina Zingari, speaking partly of her French experience, gave spatial and conceptual points of view, describing projects of museums built on the foundation of some oral collections. My contribution **"Vincenzo Agnoni, detto Scorzone, 86 anni, pastore, Cori"** (ALLEGATO 2) was a reflection on problems, including the ethical, connected to the research of oral sources, and raises the following query: given that this type of research has a rational, dialogic nature, is it possible to sketch out cognitive parameters beforehand or, is it better to let each single testimonial unfold without the presence of a preconstructed frameworks? Eleonora Censorii's contribution introduced the theme of popular theatre; Francesco Zanotelli's presentation covered business development in the area of Poggibonsi; Fabio Malfatti illustrated the potential of Transana software for the analysis of audio data, while Elio and Lucio Varriale showed parts of their videos that portray a private family archives. Maria Lai, an noteworthy artist from Sardinia who I was lucky to meet in Rome a recent conference ("Il museo verso una nuova identità", organized by Marisa Dalai), offered this thoughtful comment: at the beginning of the visitors' path in every museum, she would like to place a sign with a sentence that her Italian teacher used to say frequently when reading poetry: "It doesn't matter if you don't understand. Just follow the rhythm." In the same way, the variety of talks, discussions and other contributions of a conference also leave their mark when they are neither banal nor merely reassuring.

In the afternoon, the microphone was given to the representatives of different archives, invited by Pietro Clemente, coordinator of the round table, to express their point of view regarding the SIMBDEA proposal to create a federation of cultural institutions; an association of associations, inviting oral source archives to join SIMBDEA in view of possible convergences of practical, technical interests, as well as cultural and social missions. Clemente invited them to reflect on the fact that "given the type of work we do, we are in some way brothers, cousins associable in a project I would sum up with Don Dilani's words: *to solve a problem alone is greed; to solve it together is politics*". Each participant at the round table gave a brief history of the institution they represented in what seemed to me to be a strong declaration of identity (and the desire not to give it up). Nevertheless, they all responded positively to Clemente's invitation, to take into consideration the possibility of changing their statute. Only time will tell whether Clemente's definition of, citing the words

of Walter Benjamin, “the childhood of an event” will lead to future development. Nevertheless, I would like to underline the presence of a widespread (albeit cautious) desire to leave behind such rigid and pointless disciplinary boundaries.

It seems relevant here to mention the central points of the debate between Giuseppe Paletta and Pietro Clemente. Dr. Paletta encouraged the audience to consider enterprise as both community and culture, and expressed his hope for heuristic approaches to further study, not only historical but instead linked to anthropological methodology (i.e. studies on the imaginary, on symbolism, representation and so on). Clemente responded by thanking Paletta, adding that, “from his words comes the appeal to enlarge the anthropological consciousness of modern times”. These hopes are received with enthusiasm by those who are tired of anachronistic narrow-mindedness in the discipline (of records preservation).

To conclude, the conference imparted a healthy sense of openness by promoting firm connections between historians and anthropologists, scholars and administrators, academies and enterprises, museums and archives. The common thread that binds all participants is, of course, oral sources, regardless of how they are studied or used. Now it's the voices themselves that should become the guardians.

**The Guardians of Past Voices.
Oral Archives in Tuscany: the first census**
Review by Nadia Truglia



14 field workers covering ten Tuscan provinces has yielded a treasure of 124 archives, containing 115,072 paper records or audio and video recordings. The volume edited by Pietro Clemente and Alessandro Andreini describes the results of this study, including concise tables that clearly demonstrate the extraordinary richness and diversity of the archives. This remarkable array covers large collections, such as the Audio-visual Archives in Nomadelfia (created by Don Zeno Saltini to document the progress of his community of Catholic volunteers), to much smaller archives preserving perhaps only a few dozen records (made up of personal research for

student theses, local scholars, enthusiasts writing about local traditions and so on). These archives are prevalently classified as private and preserve variable quantities of audio spools, audio cassettes, DAT, vinyl discs, CD or video supports. They are stored in boxes, shelves, drawers or even household cupboards but also in private offices, in their association headquarters or in an area of the museum created to preserve, along with audio records, the objects of the same time period.

The breadth and vitality of the oral Tuscan archives is comparable to that of any state, municipal, regional or provincial archives as well as those generated by enterprises, or by academic, religious, economic or charitable organizations. It requires the commitment of scholars and institutions to safeguard intangible cultural heritage once it is stored (in line with the dictates of the “Convention pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel” (Convention for the safeguard of intangible cultural heritage) UNESCO, 2003).

The records, discovered thanks to the census, consist largely of recordings made with devices from the “Geloso” (a recording device named after its inventor) to the digital. They refer to the history of the 20th century in Italy as it was shaped by events and realities: the Resistance, the Second World War, agricultural and farming culture (in particular, the phenomenon of sharecropping), labor and social conflicts, but also music, popular theatre. The archives illustrates, in the words of its author, Clemente, “the marvelous show of a culture seen inside a life and a life seen inside a culture.”

The effect is kaleidoscopic: “I custodi delle voci” is a polyphonic text—a sort of “post-Anthropology”—that is to say, derived from the debates that inflamed the 1980s in a climate of critical rethinking of the discipline. In the text, a myriad of voices are represented with different tones, volumes and modalities: the voices of administrators who committed themselves to the financing of the research project; teachers and researchers who organized

and conducted the research; the voices of the people who created the archives, recording voices present in the text. The administrator, the teacher, the researcher, the archivist worked together to collect the voices of the sharecropping farmer, the shepherd, the worker, the craftsman and the soldier. Here is a long chain linked by a thread —the voice of people who ask to whisper or cry their story as well as those who try to “give voice” to those excluded from history. The work traces back to the glorious and mythical mission of Italian anthropology which, from its beginning, insisted, because of historical-social reasons, on the need to contribute to the “inroads of the masses into History”, according to Ernesto de Martino’s famous sentence.

The notion of voice is central to the solid essay by Pietro Clemente entitled “Their voices and ours”. Clemente constructs his passionate wandering through wide and narrow spaces; or past, present and future time, choosing the voice and the *poetics of listening* as his only moral support.

For Clemente, the voice becomes a sacred asset, sometimes magic, but always a catalyst of stories about professional vocations, ethical missions, disciplinary statuses, and civil responsibilities. “For years I used oral sources while always seeking their scientific validity. I criticized people who used them as ordinary or invisible tools, or mangled them with egocentric arrogance while hiding their dialogic powers. Yet I was ashamed to record my mother’s voice even if I knew I would miss her some day --as if I couldn’t accept a technical ghost and should always use my imagination, to bring back her accents, intonation and verbal irony through my mind and voice.”

Clemente, a lover of the voice who is aware of the fact that he loses the expressive richness that moving images add to the sound of an ethnographic video, but prefers “the listening together with the photography, if possible”. The “political-researcher militant” Gianni Bosio (who inaugurated a tradition of “social usage of the recorder” and wrote in Praise of the tape-recorder – in addition to founding the important archives “Istituto Ernesto de Martino”) Clemente has taken upon himself the cultural and social inheritance of Bosio, and of all the people who contributed to his project and helped him up to the present. Clemente looks towards the future and has been working for many years on a “history of memory”, “a place where people who want to tell their stories will be able to do so” instituted by the “Communes” or city administration, managed by “young anthropologists” and also conceived as a stronghold in defense of the beauty of diversity and against the standardized flattening effect of popular TV programs like “Carramba che sorpresa” (a popular 1990s Italian variety show on television).

**Vincenzo Agnoni called *Scorzone*, 86 years old, a shepherd from Cori.
A “life story” by Nadia Truglia**

When Vincenzo told me about his “narrative project”, I had no idea of what would have come out of it. He said, “come to my house in the afternoon after I come down from the mountain.



Nadia Truglia e Vincenzo Scorzone, aprile 2005

Bring your recorder, we’ll have a coffee and, I’ll tell you everything a little bit at a time. So we can write the book--my diary.” Checking my own diary, I found my answer to his request “Sure, I’ll be glad to write your story. I already have the title: “Vincenzo Agnoni called *Scorzone*, 86 years old, a shepherd from Cori.” He didn’t give me the time to finish and added “...and soldier and prisoner...”.

I met Vincenzo on April 23rd 2005. At that time, I was conducting research in the Lepirini mountains to find deserted villages of agro-pastoral huts and I had been assigned Cori as a research field; a village

in Lazio region, bordering the southern province of Rome. That day I went up the mountain with Massimo, the municipal employee who offered to come with me to meet Vincenzo *Scorzone*, the oldest shepherd in Cori. “A real character” told Massimo me, explaining me that *Scorzone* means ‘earthworm’ in the dialect of the area and that Vincenzo’s family was called that because of their way of life, in close contact with the earth.

Later Vincenzo would also tell me about his family’s nickname...“they called us Scorzoni”... but in his view, the meaning was to be found in their remarkable hardiness, in their thick hide like tree bark--*Scorzone* in their dialect.

It was about half past ten of that beautiful, sunny morning when I climbed the mountain to meet “my Ogôtemmeli (a Mali religious leader)” as I called him later – revealing the whims and the idealism of my younger anthropologist self, but also Vincenzo’s extraordinary memory and reliability, his tendency not to ignore negative or “disgraceful” aspects (to use his words), his familiarity with sheep-breeding and finally, his charming expressiveness. These qualities that made me reminded me of the “social, technical, intellectual, moral and physical characteristics” recommended by Marcel Griaule for the choice of the informer.

Vincenzo knew of my arrival that day and when he saw me, he came towards me warmly taking my hand. “What now, miss?” he said and gave me his credentials.

84 years old, he had seen many things in his life but what he had witnessed as a prisoner in Germany during the Second World War could not be compared with anything else. Catching me off guard he immediately started to tell me at length about episodes and anecdotes of that period. I tried with difficulty to bring the conversation back to my primary topic of interest: huts, villages, shepherd, and transhumance. He answered my questions with exceptional precision and a wealth of details, but then he began to speak about Germany. I listened with curiosity and a desire to know more, but then I brought him back to Cori. We were both so absorbed in our conversation that at first, I didn’t even pay attention to the fact that Cori was “my” village of agro-pastoral huts to bring to the researchers’ notice. The village of *Le Campore* would in fact be chosen, along with other four villages, to be the object of a more in-depth study.

I went back to Cori many times and, even if the people I met and interviewed were different, the Scorzoni brothers, Vincenzo and Tommaso stood out as key informers. The interviews with Vincenzo always followed the same pattern: I asked questions about the village and Vincenzo answered them-- but only after obliging me to listen and especially, to record the most important episodes of his four years of imprisonment.



Vincenzo Scorzone, maggio 2005

I started to collect a great deal of exceptional information for my research. In the meantime, I took note in my diary of the impressions pertaining to the relational/emotional developments of the research. In my diary, in the page of 2nd August 2005 I read:

A while ago, coming back from his journey to Germany, where he took his two nephews to see the four concentration camps (now museums) of his imprisonment, Vincenzo showed me a piece of creased paper on which someone (I think the keeper of a museum –maybe in Fullen) had written the

title of a book. It was obvious that Vincenzo wanted me to help him find that “journal of imprisonment” as he called it and, with it, the piece of his life that he continuously speaks about.

That evening I ordered the book via Internet and, after a long wait, the book arrived. So yesterday evening I called Vincenzo and arranged our meeting for the next day, without telling him I had the book. I wanted to surprise him.

It’s strange, somehow he knew I would bring him that book today...as soon as he saw me he hugged me and pointed to the table where he had put a heap of figs telling me that “he too had a surprise for me”.

I gave him Adalberto Alpini’s book and he read the title, “Il Sordomuto dell Lager” (The Deaf-mute of the Concentration Camp). He burst into tears because the word ‘ deaf-mute’ opened the door to some of his memories. Vincenzo was well acquainted with the protagonist of the story; they were fellow prisoners in the same sleeping quarters of the camp. Vincenzo told me many episodes of that period and, as usual, I asked him something about the huts. Before letting me go, he gave me another present: a wooden stool, “like the ones used in the backyard of the huts” he told me, adding that “when I saw it the other day I thought of

you, that you could put it in that museum". Then, after a long pause, he added "I am happy to be your friend". I simply answered "me too".

I have quoted this entire page because it shows how our relationship changed in the meanwhile.

A few months passed and, even though I still concentrated on my primary research about the huts, I did not consider the hours spent listening to his stories of Germany as a necessary evil. At some point, I became interested in what Vincenzo wanted to express and I wondered why he was telling this all these things. What he was really trying to communicate to the world?

As a certain consequence of reading Alpini's book, (a laborious read, he later confessed) he started to ask me, at first shyly and almost as a joke, but then with increasing seriousness and frequency, to write the story of his own imprisonment.



Vincenzo durante le riprese al Museo delle scritture, aprile 2006

I understood that I couldn't refuse, nor wanted to, even if I had no specific skills for collecting life stories. The feeling of responsibility alternated with moments of excitement when I remembered that being an anthropologist means, as I have read and heard so many times, to "give a voice". I just needed to find the right way for both of us. In the meantime I started to record "some important facts", as Vincenzo asked me to do.

On December 10th 2005, in the afternoon, after he came back from the mountain, we started our work.

We had agreed on a sort of 'plan' to follow a chronological order: his childhood, schooling and so on, but emphasizing his military service and imprisonment. I felt confident of the outcome of this plan, given the success of my interviews up to that moment. Vincenzo is a superb narrator; you open a circle by asking him about something and he speaks at length, digressing often, but in the end, he always closes the circle.

During that first longed-for session, Vincenzo should have told me about his childhood and his parents. When I came back home in the evening I felt bewildered and confused: he had kept me for three hours, recounting his youthful love stories, especially his relationships with two German girls after the liberation.

He stayed in Germany for six months after the liberation because of an impassable bridge, but he was no longer a prisoner. He worked, he met new people and he went out with girls more "open" and "uninhibited" than the ones he had met at home. Several interviews later, I realized with surprise that his stories went back to that period in Germany following his imprisonment. At the beginning, I thought he wanted to verbalize the details of the violence he had seen and experienced. I had even seen him crying while he told me about the risk of contracting TB, which he had barely escaped, about his loss of 45 kilos, about the summary executions... Instead Vincenzo was telling me romantic and passionate love stories. So I played for time. Where was he going? What did he want to tell me?

"Vincenzo, I thought you wanted to tell me the details of your imprisonment...why are you telling me these things?"

Each time he answered *"Because those were the most beautiful days of my life."*

And to my great astonishment, I understood that by “beautiful days” he meant not only those after the liberation and before returning to Italy, but all those spent in Germany. “Beautiful days” didn’t mean peaceful days to him---periods of time that are filled with the same daily occupations. He meant the days when you lived intensely – and relive in your memory – filled with events that draw the listener’s attention.

I think that now Vincenzo’s ‘liberation’ comes from the awareness of having lived and seen, during those four years in Germany, things that not everyone can talk about, not even scholars. “I could teach history to young people,” he says.

The emotional tension and the depth of Vincenzo’s experiences during his imprisonment left their mark on him. Paradoxically, their memory has become a source of freedom now. A few days ago, he told me:

“When I cannot sleep, when I’m all alone in the mountains and there is no-one to speak to, I start thinking about those years, those people, the friends that I buried...I think about how they were, what they said, how I made their tombs...I think about all these things and it helps me to bear up...”

The meeting with Vincenzo Scorzone had an interesting development a few months later. In autumn of 2005, I was involved in a research project to create the documentary base for the Museo delle Scritture in Bassiano, the village in the Lepini area where Aldo Manuzio (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aldo_Manuzio) was born. I was in charge of one of the three rooms, the one dedicated to personal writing and autobiography.

In April 2006, Vincenzo Padiglione and I contacted a group of students of Museum Anthropology and Communication Ethnography at the University “La Sapienza” in Rome. We involved them in a training program to learn the ethnographic practices of reflexive writing, to research experience of local autobiographic writings, and to study the contextualization of relationships between writing and orality in the narration of one’s own life.

Along with the authors of autobiographies, we were interested in the elder citizens of the Lepini mountains, who wanted to give the museum a testimony of their life experiences. Their narrative skills make them master storytellers and invaluable carriers of know-how that is implicit in wide-ranging discourse and the oral reporting of experience.

For this reason, I organized a meeting between the students and Vincenzo Scorzone who, in 2006, came to Bassiano and, in the picturesque “graffiti room” (an ex-prison whose walls are covered in graffiti written by the prisoners), donated his memories of imprisonment, captured once and for all in a video diary. On that occasion, he didn’t just give the museum his testimony; he also inspired a project of preservation and valorization of oral sources.

It is precisely the ritual and expressive dimension of his personal history donation that revealed the strategic importance of the museum framework as an essential requirement to enable this type of initiative. To be invited to give a precious gift of oneself in a “temple of culture”, to be received warmly and with sensitivity, made the “temple” more familiar; an important place, yet one where you can recognize yourself. A museum is a place to record significant experiences, and everyday memories of the 20th century—often wrongly ascribed minor significance

The meeting with Vincenzo and the power of his personal history on video convinced us of the opportunity to create a room in the museum that is not just a collection of autobiographies but a real “Memory Room”, as it was called in the project proposed later by Vincenzo Padiglione, Antonio Riccio and myself.

Together with traditional autobiographies (autobiographies, diaries, letters and so on), this Room will collect the memories that are “self narrated” by people who live in prevalently oral contexts. These collections can be considered as true *narrated autobiographies*: voices,

images, videos, objects and impressions expressed using alternative modes of traditional personal history and storytelling.

The *Memory Room* is also intended to be a *meeting place* for the narrators and the people who want to listen and learn. Moreover, it is a protected space where it is possible to donate personal histories and individual recollections to the collective memory.

To carry out this initiative, we are building a permanent setting-laboratory of visual anthropology in the museum, that plans monthly meetings during which the local narrators, previously selected and invited to participate in the Project, will be called to give their story in the “Memory Room” where it will be shared, preserved and safeguarded.

The idea of the project arose from the meeting between the need for preserving (historical) memory and the desire to give a voice to this memory.

My meeting with Vincenzo Agnoni called *Scorzona*,⁸⁶ years old, shepherd, soldier and prisoner found an unexpected but not accidental development in that afternoon when he came to Bassiano to tell us the story of his turbulent war years.

Vincenzo turned out to be a powerful narrator, whose presence captivated all of his listeners for over six hours. He was capable of interlacing episodes from near and far, personal experiences, local contexts as well as national and global historical settings. He gave his narrative a rhythm and force that revealed his inclination to sharing and sociability. I also believe that in telling his story, he healed his own sorrows; in recounting past traumas, he alleviated them. But in particular, his steady dedication, both cognitive (not forgetting) and affective (remembering), reveals a remarkable ethical dimension. It suggests that the memory, explained publicly and leaving its trace (both as performance and as a video registration), could redress the wrongs of the history, make up for the harshness of life, and be a type of justice that denounces the criminals or glorifies the unknown hero.