

«Before it disappears...» - MEMORO.org

by *Renata Meazza*

5 years, 10 months, 27 days, 17 hours, 26 minutes of Italian memory transferred since June 2008.

7 years, 9 months, 29 days, 12 hours, 37 minutes of international memory.

80 years, the average age of the people interviewed in Italy.

79 years, the average age of the people interviewed worldwide.

These are some of the numbers of The Memory Bank, a project founded in 2007 by Lorenzo Fenoglio, Franco Nicola, Valentina Vaio, and Luca Novarino. Since then, the project has expanded to include 13 more contributors from 9 different countries.

The aims of the founders are simple: collect the experiences and life stories of people born before the 1940s, in the form of 10 minute filmed accounts recalling, “how our lives were when we were children on our grandparents’ knees”. These stories describe fragments of lives according to the customs and values of another period. The significance of memory as a vehicle to hand down knowledge is also brought to mind, made more explicit by the use of the term *Bank* to support the idea that memory, indeed, holds a patrimonial value.

Personal stories were videotaped so as to juxtapose the oral memory with the gestures and the expressions that go with it; the instrument of diffusion is the Net to grant the maximum visibility of the contents and to attract the interest of the youngest generations.

Public institutions such as the Province of Rome have also contributed to the website: 170 interviews with 40 people conducted by 50 students from 7 high schools of the Province for a total of 19 hours, 110 minutes of memories are the “treasures” that recount everything, from simple episodes of everyday life to important historical events such as the American landing in Anzio. Other complex projects created within the Bank include “c’eraunvolt.it” accomplished in cooperation with Enel Spa to collect memories linked to the energy field: “Do you have a grandfather who worked for an electric company? Does your grandmother have a memory related to the arrival of the electrical appliances? Does your old neighbor recall how his life changed with the arrival of the electric energy? Well, let’s film these individuals while they tell their stories and put the videos on the website”. For 40 days, a camper will travel around Italy (20 stops in electrical plants, 20 stops in the squares of the Italian regional capitals) hunting for memories.

The Banca della Memoria is currently sponsored by Birra Peroni Spa which, following a tragic fire in the plant in Bari on July 25, 2008, decided to experiment this new way of promotion: with the slogan “unite today more than yesterday”; all Puglian citizens are invited to tell their personal stories related to the company in a section of the website dedicated to Birra Peroni.

The project is fuelled by many passionate “memory hunters” travelling around the world with a camera and many self-produced videos loaded directly onto the website by their authors. What Memoro wants to pass on is precisely the passion and the enthusiasm of both researchers and

interviewees, motivated by their desire to tell their lives through their narrations: a single episode of everyday life, an important meeting, some special knowledge acquired over the years, the story of an entrepreneur, a worker, a farmer, a mother or a grandmother.

For people like myself who have dealt for many years with ethnographic records, through the collection of oral stories and the cataloguing of records patrimonies organized into databases, there are two striking features of this project: on the one hand, the quantity and the unpredictability of the themes and, on the other, the simplicity of the thematic approach, easily retraceable thorough simple *tags*.

Memoro is not a historical or anthropological research project on oral history; this is easily understandable from the apparently random union of many stories without a unifying theme, place or social connection. *Memory itself* is the focus of the research, the passing on of this memory is the driving force behind the project. However, the seemingly random approach reveals expert direction in the montage that has created a completed discourse on single themes or episodes, drawing the listener into the complexity of spontaneous narration although often disjointed and with no systematic structure. The complexity of oral research, despite the problems related to the difficulty in finding the right “informers” on specific themes and the experimentation of correct methods in dealing with the information, seem to diminish in favor of the quantity of memories collected and put on the web.

One question arises spontaneously: what is the purpose of such enormous effort in collecting so many accounts? The files seem to be addressed to their interlocutors more than to other subjects. A sort of self-celebration of memories and an information overload make the visit gratifying from the point of view of curiosity but a little less so from that of gaining knowledge.

We live in a global society where memory and its related identity, both collective and individual, are questioned. Without ignoring the precision with which records are treated, we can say that Memoro is a little bit obsessed by memory, the same obsession we can find in the media, where our age is perceived to be at risk of forgetting our common past with the devastating effect, in my opinion, of creating the need of preserving the entire world’s memory.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* already warned us against it. He describes a scene in which the imagination of the village of Macondo is hit by a strange epidemic causing the progressive loss of memories. The village smith, worried about forgetting the name of the instruments he used every day, started to put labels on every object: anvil, hammer, tongs... Impressed by this remedy, the mayor of Macondo, José Arcadio Buendía, also started to label the entire village. Marquez wrote:

he labeled animals and plants: cow, goat, pig, hen, cassava, banana tree. Slowly, analyzing all the possibilities of forgetting, he understood that one day in the future, people would have recognized things by their labels without remembering their use. So he became more explicit...This is a cow, it must be milked every morning to have milk and the milk must be boiled to put it in the coffee to have caffelatte.

In his extreme attempt to save the memory of his fellow townsmen, Buendía tried to build a memory machine to store all their experience and their knowledge with thousands of terms.

And in a similar attempt to save the memory of the world, Memoro has built a virtual bank to store the knowledge and the experience of thousands of people told to other thousands of people, potential web users. As professionals who are passionate about oral accounts, life stories and are convinced of the positive effort and good intention of Memoro’s “memories’ hunters”, we pose one further question: when will we be able to survive oblivion?