Voices of Our Time

Albert Venher on Documentation in the Frontline City of Dnipro

The conversation was recorded at the Center for Urban History on June 3, 2023

Albert Venher (A. V.): I'm a historian by training and currently work at the Department of History at Oles Honchar Dnipro National University. My research has focused on oral history since my student days. For me, it's both a way to interpret the past and understand the present.

Regarding the impact of the full-scale war on this field, it has been transformative. Like many, I felt an initial shock and asked myself, "What is the role of humanities scholars when missiles are flying and cities are under constant attack?" In this world of explosions and daily losses, I reflected deeply on my responsibilities—not only as a historian but as a witness and participant. The sense of duty to record the immediate experiences for future generations became stronger. Drawing from my work on World War II, I understood the importance of capturing voices close to the event, not decades removed, though those are essential as well.

My wife, also a historian who previously worked at the Czech Academy of Sciences, and I began a project centered on Dnipro, a frontline city that has become a volunteer hub and a refuge for displaced people. Though Lviv initially served as the primary destination for many who travelled by train, Dnipro has also received a large influx, especially those from regions like Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson, often arriving by cars.

We started this project just before the New Year in 2023, at a point where the situation, though dire, had stabilized to some extent. The chaos was gone. The Brownian motion that once defined the city

had settled into a kind of order—chaotic, perhaps, but still an order. We had come to understand these new rules, learned how to navigate the altered conditions, and adapted to it all. This adaptation was crucial, not least from a psychological perspective.

One of our main challenges has been establishing connections with internally displaced people. My wife reached out to volunteer centers, built relationships, and received contacts. We recorded interviews both at our home and in others' homes, gathering around 40 interviews so far. We didn't conduct a rigid selection at first, but certain themes have naturally emerged over time—some stories repeat, while others stand out with unique details. In our work with volunteers, we recorded the stories of visible figures, though the contributions of less visible volunteers, like grandmothers knitting socks, remain largely unrecorded. Their invisible contributions represent a vast field of individual efforts, often overlooked. Initially, our project felt somewhat uncertain, but over time, potential pathways for development have begun to take shape.

■ **Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.):** Looking back to the previous year, what inspired you to begin documenting and recording the stories of displaced people and volunteers in Dnipro? I understand that your educational background and your awareness of the types of sources necessary for writing the history of the war played a significant role.

■ **A. V.:** Why am I doing this? It's a difficult question. In fact, it's the larger question of the purpose of our profession. I think the key lies in "for whom" we do this work. One defining trait of humans is our natural curiosity about our history—we look back, reflect, and try to understand our place in time.

As for the need for sources, I believe it's something we, as historians, carry subconsciously. We know the challenges of sourcing, the gaps in historical records, and the voices we've lost. We feel the absence of those voices and understand the importance of capturing them now.

There is also a dilemma between the ethics and the aesthetics of research: they are intertwined, but currently, ethics seem to dominate, shaping and often distorting the nature of our research. The questions we ask ourselves now mirror those posed in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: How "pure" should our scientific experiments be?

■ **N. O.:** But in social sciences, can there truly be any "pure" experiments?

■ **A. V.:** There are degrees of purity, I suppose. If someone doesn't want to talk, we respect their wishes—we won't record them. How-

ever, if I know a person is a valuable witness, I may push harder to gain their consent, calling them multiple times. From an ethical standpoint, that could be problematic, but what matters more to me: the individual's comfort, or their testimony for the future?

■ **N. O.:** Yes, this is the critical question—why are we documenting? Are we doing it for the future, recording these materials in the fullest form possible to preserve them for history? Or are we also concerned with the immediate experience—the here and now—ensuring that those we interact with, especially in the midst of war, do not feel further burdened by their own suffering? It's a balance between capturing history and maintaining sensitivity to the people whose stories we're telling.

■ **A. V.:** Yes. But I want to emphasize again that I adhere strictly to ethical standards. I feel the weight of this responsibility. For me, ethics must come first. I've heard of situations where oral historians have gone into villages, gathered all the grandmothers, and then recorded their stories and moved on while the women were left in tears. For research, it may be useful to capture these stories, but for those who were made to cry, the cost could be too high. The key question is: Who are we working for?

That's why the interviews we are conducting now can serve as a source not only about the people we interview but about us, the researchers. They say just as much, if not more, about us—about our ethics, our position as researchers, our cultural and anthropological context, and the tools we use. These interviews will tell more about us than the body of the research itself.

■ **N. O.:** How did you decide whose stories to record? What questions did you ask? And how did you determine when to start and stop?

■ **A. V.:** When it all began, there was a certain "omnivorousness"—I would call it that. We recorded conversations with anyone who gave their consent because, at the time, we had no clear information about displaced people or their personal experiences. We were searching for people, not specific stories. My wife visited one of the volunteer centers that supported displaced people, explained our project, and returned several times. She also visited women volunteers who conducted master classes and business training for IDPs. Some were eager to share their stories about their business successes or losses. We also found volunteers through social media and posted about our project on Facebook. People responded, and that's how we started recording.

As for the questions, the first part of the interview was narrative: "What would you like to tell us about yourself?" Then, if the interviewee

was a displaced person, we asked about their expectations for the war, how they reacted to its outbreak, their evacuation experiences, and the challenges they faced in adapting to a new environment. For volunteers, we asked about their motivations, the problems they encountered, society's reactions to their work, their successes, and their future plans.

Recently, we've slowed down a bit. We're still recording, but not as actively. Now I have some clearer ideas on how to narrow the focus of our research. That initial "omnivorous" approach was useful because it allowed us to form a broad collection of stories. However, it also meant the subject matter was a bit too diffuse. For instance, we recorded stories from businessmen, teachers, and an employee from Azovstal. While this eclectic mix is valuable, it doesn't provide the deep, focused insights that a more specific research topic could offer. Now, I'm interested in narrowing the focus to explore the experiences of psychiatric hospital doctors during the war. I already have research on psychiatric hospitals during the Nazi occupation, and some of the mechanisms from then overlap with what is happening now. I want to explore the challenges doctors faced, particularly in terms of evacuation. Some hospitals were able to evacuate under fire, and that experience is largely overlooked.

■ **N. O.:** I observe similar processes in our documentation initiative. At first, the field was very inclusive—we focused on diversification and even set it as one of our selection criteria. We listened to people from different regions, of different ages and genders, with various professional backgrounds and experiences. Over time, however, we developed more specific questions, which were largely motivated by our earlier research. In a way, we bring back or even build upon the continuity of our professional selves. Or perhaps we modify these selves in response to the challenges we see around us. It's interesting to think about how the broadest sieve, initially used to capture diverse stories, slowly narrows as we begin to return to the field with our own research questions, instead of just reacting to the immediate situation around us.

■ **A. V.:** I will say that I don't want to return to these materials, at least not in the way others might expect. I think it's more important for sociologists to engage with the "now." As a historian, I need distance to use sources. I understand that sociology is interested in what is happening in the present, while the pulse is still beating. Historians, however, come in once that pulse stops.

A source is like a good wine: the older it gets, the better it is. Perhaps my opinion will change in the future, but for now, I say that I

do not want to work with these stories as a historian. I've recorded them, and that's it. My function today is to capture them. I'm ready to put them away for now, and in a hundred years, someone else will discover them.

I'm documenting and recording, but I'm not creating oral history in the traditional sense. What we are doing is not about the "transient present" that anthropologists often focus on. This is not a fleeting moment; it's a harsh, ongoing reality that won't disappear soon. I believe these records should simply rest for now. In five hundred years, they will be even more valuable as historical sources. In source studies, we distinguish between ordinary and extraordinary sources. Right now, these are conceptually ordinary sources, but in the future, say, in 500 years, they will become extraordinary, and special attention will be paid to them.

However, preserving these sources is a challenge. What will happen to these massive documentation initiatives in 10, 20, or 50 years? I'm convinced that not even half of what exists today will survive. The issue is not only about media preservation but also about whether people will still be motivated to maintain these records. This will likely be the most documented war in history, but even it will have huge gaps, because we won't be able to preserve everything. Preserving this material requires immense resources. Recording is not financially burdensome, but preservation is serious and costly. Where will we store these materials? In what format? On what media?

We had an experience with my senior colleagues who went on expeditions to the former German colonies in the early 2000s. They recorded a large number of tapes, but these tapes eventually deteriorated and became unreadable—demagnetized or otherwise ruined. What we managed to transcribe was all that remained. The only real solution for preservation is transcription, but it's a time-consuming and expensive process. Of all the initiatives we currently have, I can confidently say that less than half of them will be transcribed. Maybe only a third. The only way to ensure that this material survives is to transcribe it. If it's transcribed, archives or museums will be more likely to accept it.

■ **N. O.:** But in order for this material to be preserved in an archive or museum, it must be contextualized in a certain way. That's why the issue of metadata is so important—it's not just about recording the interviews, but also about describing them.

■ **A. V.:** Yes, that's why each of our interviews has a "passport." We have an established procedure: permission for use, details about

who was recorded, what was recorded, and a summary of the conversation. This is key for researchers who may want to work with this material in the future.

It would be good to keep a field diary, but that's in an ideal world. At the very least, the first stage should be cataloging. Without cataloging at the initial stage, I am convinced that these documents will disappear later. Writing it down means you're still emotionally invested in the resource, and then the more tedious, routine work begins. The vast majority of people don't have the time for that.

■ **N. O.:** I'm also interested in your thoughts on further preservation—whether we need one institution to serve as an umbrella for all documentation, or if it's better to have a network where we just know that, for example, there is Albert Venher in Dnipro, the Center for Urban History in Lviv, and other initiatives in Kyiv. How do you see this in the future?

■ **A. V.:** It's a double-edged sword, and different things are important at different stages. Relatively speaking, at this stage, it's great that the documentation is dispersed—what we call "initiative from below." And this is inevitable—the process will be dispersed. But for the long term—50, 100, or even 200 years—it's clear that there should be a central institution. I don't know how to create it, but when you start collecting everything, the transportation and re-accounting process becomes a challenge. It's like a fire—something is always lost in the process. On the other hand, as long as there's a specific person caring for a small archive, it exists. If that person is gone, it's very likely that the archive will end up in a landfill somewhere.

■ **N. O.:** That's why we need institutions.

■ **A. V.:** That's why we need institutions. So, to the question of whether it is necessary to bring all this together? In the long run, yes. But I don't know the mechanism. Right now, scholarly resources are spread thin because we need to comprehend an ocean of information that is virtually impossible to comprehend. We may be saved by joint metadata, but this isn't something we have. Someone may be doing something, but that's their individual approach to their projects. But conceptually, there is no shared metadata scheme. If there was one institution that took care of this, then we would have common metadata. We could also use quantitative methods, but we can't do that now.

■ **N. O.:** If you were to give any advice to those who are taking on similar work, what would it be?

■ **A. V.:** If I was the only one doing all this, I wouldn't have done the "passport" for the interviews. My wife has a slightly different person-

ality: she sat down and quickly filled out everything. And it weighs on me. I mean, I talk so confidently about these passports, but I don't make them. My wife makes them. If only I had recorded these interviews, there would be no passports, and the conceptual perspective of these materials would be disappointing. So if you can't do it yourself, then you need to find a person in your team who won't be burdened by it.

Because, again, sociologists are used to doing it for themselves here and now, and historians are not. Unfortunately, we have a low level of understanding cataloging and the like. We take it for granted. But when we come to an archive, a library, or somewhere else, there are dozens, perhaps hundreds of years of painstaking, completely invisible work by these people, mostly women. We never notice them and don't know what they look like, but all of our extensive, bravura scholarly work rests on their shoulders, on this cataloging. They build what we stand on.

■ **N. O.:** Perhaps the current situation shows the importance of such invisible work, when we are forced to do it ourselves. Suddenly, we realize the other side of scholarly work, as well as the need for those critical infrastructures that we take for granted and without which we would not be able to work: light, heat, communication. Any other tips?

■ **A. V.:** Not tips, but rather a question to which I don't have a ready answer, but which is worth thinking about: what is it for and is it necessary at all? I mean, where do you want to send the collected materials later, will anyone need them? And how to process all this later? This is a challenge. In other words, if I put myself in this place of a researcher in 100 years, then I will use it. Although, again, the tools will change. Perhaps we will come to automated analysis of intonation, halftones, and tones in a recording. But how to work with this huge array? Since oral history, when it was institutionalized in our modern space, was based on the notion that we need to find those few unique storytellers who still remember. You hunt for them, you find them, you record the stories of all ten or however many of them, and you seem to know what to do with them. But what if there are 20,000 of them? Now the interview has become a mass source. The challenge for the future is how to change the tools of work. That is, the oral history that I, you, and our colleagues have come to know is changing. It will be something else.