



## Iryna Sklokina. Postwar Life of an Interview

“To me, this is about reclaiming the uncertain future that has been, and continues to be, taken from us as a community. By creating these archives of interviews, we are preserving something that will live on in that future.” This is how Natalia Otrishchenko, the compiler of this collection, defines her role as a documentarian and researcher who has been gathering stories about the war since March 2022. This collection of interviews is the outcome of conversations among colleagues who each perceive the significance of oral histories in shaping the future, fulfilling a social role, and contributing to academic and media discourse in their unique ways. In this afterword, I aim to explore how various initiatives reflect on the role of oral history archives in building the future and establishing sustainable projects. What are the distinctive features of oral histories of the Russo-Ukrainian war as sources today? What impact do they currently have—and will they have—on public opinion, justice, and fairness? How are oral histories used to foster communities and whom do they include or exclude? Finally, will personal oral histories become a key foundation for postwar memory culture, competing with or complementing media, artistic, and propaganda narratives?

### **The Future of Oral History as a Historical Source**

Many of the documentary initiatives featured in this collection underscore the profound importance of preserving stories for future historical research. Naturally, this aligns with the traditional under-

standing of history as a scholarly discipline that examines the past from a position of impartiality and distance. But it also highlights the unique challenges of wartime, marked by countless losses—of people, buildings, monuments, and entire cities. The testimonies recorded during such times capture not only individual experiences but also the historical magnitude of these events.<sup>1</sup> Many contributors also stress the critical importance of urgency in recording and narrating events as they unfold, highlighting this as a key feature to prevent the layering of memory politics and personal distortions over time. In these discussions, parallels are often drawn with efforts to document the Second World War, emphasizing the exceptional value of testimonies captured as close to the events as possible. Indeed, many of the earliest accounts collected during the 1940s served for decades as the only sources for understanding aspects of Soviet memory later silenced or marginalized. These include the experiences of Jews and Roma, forced labor in Nazi Germany, and life under occupation.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, mainstream memoirs of frontline soldiers and partisans recorded during the same period later became foundational for reinterpreting the war during the Khrushchev Thaw and perestroika. Historians repeatedly sought “authentic” memories, often returning to those who had previously shared their stories in written or oral form, housed in museum collections. Svitlana Makhovska, Natalia Otrishchenko, and Oksana Dovgoplova similarly advocate for repeated interviews, emphasizing the authenticity and immediacy of stories told during the events themselves. Such narratives are seen as more authentic, “alive,” and less prone to distortion by overarching collective narratives. As Makhovska notes:

“We need to plan carefully and do everything we can to ensure that the collective narrative does not overshadow the individual experiences of Ukrainians in the Russo-Ukrainian war” (p. 36).

The task of understanding how war propaganda, media, and the social memory of past wars—as well as the broader frameworks

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1 See the case of the war in Syria (Saber and Long 2019, 447).

2 One of the most striking examples is the *Black Book*, a collection of testimonies from the 1940s documenting the Holocaust in the occupied Soviet territories. Although it was suppressed in the Stalin era and initially unpublished in the USSR, it appeared in the United States in the 1940s and later in Israel in 1980. Since its first publication, the *Black Book* has been regarded for decades as a vital source on the fate of Soviet Jews. Over time, it has become evident that the book is not merely a record of the Holocaust but also a reflection of the culture of memory, censorship, and propaganda surrounding its creation and dissemination (see Ducey 2006).

shaping narratives about personal identity and experience—have influenced the personal histories of the Russo-Ukrainian war being recorded today is one that will unfold in the future. Yet even as these narratives are captured in their raw “immediacy,” their preservation in lasting archival forms is crucial. Several contributors to this collection highlight how the process has renewed their appreciation for the significance of seemingly “technical” tasks, such as transcription, organization, naming, tagging, and other archiving activities:

“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” (Albert Venher, p. 79).

Documentation initiatives have notably begun to reframe the role of transcribers, recognizing them as more than just “technical staff.” These efforts involve transcribers in meaningful ways, such as participating in discussions about the content of interviews, attending sessions with psychologists, and engaging in conversations about their emotional well-being during the work process.

Some initiatives place a strong emphasis on transcripts as the most reliable form of archival preservation (Venher, p. 77), while others advocate for the use of video recordings, particularly to reach broader audiences. Organizations like Post Bellum, the War Childhood Museum, and Ukraine War Archive highlight the accessibility and popularity of video as a medium that is easier for audiences to engage with. Another critical consideration emerges: the extent to which reducing an interview to a transcript can distort its content, strip it of nuanced meaning, and hinder the interviewee’s ability to “speak for themselves.” Various strategies have been proposed to address this issue. For instance, the Palestinian Oral History Archive, created with refugees in Lebanon by the American University of Beirut, employs a sophisticated keyword and tagging system for video content. This system incorporates tags in both local dialects and English while preserving unique concepts that lack direct analogues in other contexts (Sleiman and Chebaro 2018). This approach ensures the preservation of linguistic and paralinguistic elements of the narrative, maintaining its immediacy and performative aspects.

Albert Venher takes a radical stance on the balance between using oral histories to influence the present and preserving them exclusively as sources for future historians. He argues:

“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” (pp. 76-77).

Another approach, also centered on future interpretations of interviews, involves publishing the stories as they are, providing them as raw sources for other researchers. For instance, the *Ukrainian Historical Journal* includes a special section dedicated to military stories, preserving narratives in their original form. In contrast, creating videos or films requires a more interpretive intervention, as it involves crafting a cohesive story from fragments.

The interpretation of sources, access, and dissemination often hinges on the institutional framework for archiving them. At present, there is no consensus on a single national-level institution tasked with preserving and providing access to these materials. Notably, centrally strengthened institutions, such as the Institute of National Remembrance, tend to favor a more centralized approach (p. 137). In contrast, many initiatives view their primary responsibility as supporting local communities. As a result, they take on the task of independently developing archiving and storage formats at the local level, often tailored to the needs of those communities.

### **The Role of Oral History in Shaping Public Opinion**

The notion that stories documented during the war should promptly contribute to tangible societal change is a common thread across most documentation initiatives. A widespread goal is to shape public opinion both in Ukraine and internationally, raising awareness about the nature and scale of Russian army crimes, as well as highlighting the experiences of regions most impacted by the fighting and occupation.

The documentary initiatives featured in the collection employ a variety of publication formats, including short videos, half-hour edited films, media articles, and scholarly works aimed at an international audience. But some initiatives prioritize archiving and preservation over public dissemination. For instance, the Center for Urban History provides access to interviews only to individual researchers upon request, while the Institute of National Remembrance restricted access to its online archive following Russia’s full-scale invasion to protect soldiers at the front. Each approach reflects a careful balance be-

tween the aim to influence public opinion and the need to mitigate potential risks—whether to the storytellers, soldiers, or society as a whole—arising from security and ethical concerns.

During wartime, certain types of information are widely regarded as inadmissible for disclosure—such as details that could aid the enemy or endanger the narrator. However, there is no unanimous agreement among participants in documentary initiatives regarding the exact nature and boundaries of such information. Existing guidelines include the March 2022 Order of the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (Commander-in-Chief 2022), recommendations by the National Council on Television and Radio Broadcasting regarding sensitive topics like children during the war (National Council 2022), and the guidance from the Commission on Journalistic Ethics (Commission 2022). Yet it is evident that universal criteria for this kind of information are difficult to establish. Many interviews in the collection advocate for collaborative decision-making, emphasizing the importance of consulting with colleagues and external experts to evaluate whether a specific interview could pose a risk to national security or the individuals involved.

This raises important questions about the applicability of widely practiced international approaches, such as university ethics committees, to the Ukrainian context. These committees meticulously assess the legal, moral, and security aspects of oral history projects, including their research design and questionnaires. They are often criticized, however, for their bureaucratic tendencies and overly formalized approaches, where anonymizing interviews—removing names and identifying details—is considered the gold standard. It is worth noting that the principle of “do no harm” and the emphasis on anonymization stem from medical research, where a person’s identity is generally secondary to their physical parameters, treated purely as “data” (Le Roux 2015, 555).

Informed consent is deeply rooted in the principles of privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality, as upheld by ethics committees. These principles allow qualitative sociology, for instance, to portray narrators as social types without identifying them as specific individuals. However, in many cases, anonymization can hinder the goals of oral history and the narrators’ intentions. Le Roux highlights that anonymization can erase authorship, sever the narrator’s connection to their story as personal heritage, limit their engagement in societal dialogue, devalue their contribution, and even weaken the credibility of research based on anonymized transcripts (Le Roux 2015). Mia

Martin Hobbs, in her research on Vietnam War veterans, demonstrates that interviewees often misunderstand—or interpret differently from researchers—concepts like anonymization, the “sensitive nature of information,” and the boundaries of acceptable disclosure (Hobbs 2021). Whether a person wishes to be identified by name or not can also depend on their social status, reflecting the dynamics of power, unwanted “protection,” and paternalism in the researcher-narrator relationship. Hobbs advocates for a highly individualized approach, where decisions about retaining or removing names are tailored to each narrator. However, such an approach is challenging in institutional archives that adopt anonymization as a default practice, as seen in the Urban Media Archive of the Center for Urban History. An alternative solution lies in dividing interviews into distinct parts, as implemented by the Ukraine War Archive, Post Bellum, and After Silence projects. This method involves separating publicly available portions of interviews from sections containing sensitive or confidential information. The latter may be accessible only upon special request, such as to law enforcement agencies, lawyers, or human rights defenders, or withheld from public access entirely. This approach, emphasizing the narrator’s personal contribution and fostering their openness to ongoing dialogue, supports community building and promotes social integration.

### **Interview as a Method of Social Integration and Community Building**

Some Ukrainian documentary initiatives assert that “capturing testimonies ‘here and now’ during an active war was (and remains) an unprecedented approach in global practice” (p. 29)—a perspective that is difficult to agree with. The digital era has made capturing military events in real-time significantly more accessible, not only for professional historians but also for community members documenting their own experiences and, in turn, themselves.<sup>3</sup> Since 2014, Ukraine has seen ongoing efforts to record interviews during the war, accompanied by scholarly analysis and self-reflection on these practices. For instance, Yuliia Yurchuk and Liudmyla Voronova have explored the challenges of interviewing individuals directly affected by the war,

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3 One of the most widely studied topics in this context is the war in Syria, particularly interviews with witnesses of the events within the country and refugees living abroad. For example, see Saber and Long (2019).

drawing insights from professionals in historical science, journalism, and media (Yurchuk and Voronova 2020). These (auto)documentation initiatives foster a shared semantic field among participants, strengthen connections, and clarify objectives. Community-based archives, whether created with or without professional involvement, empower individuals by allowing them to express themselves directly—bypassing the mediation of scholars, avoiding the constraints of traditional archival standards and classifications, and steering clear of rigid questionnaires that might otherwise frame their narratives. Among the initiatives featured in the collection, only the Ukraine War Archive and the Institute of National Remembrance accept contributions from individuals outside their projects, even if those submissions do not adhere to specific methodologies. These vernacular materials, created by individuals themselves, broaden the scope of documentation efforts. But the long-term sustainability and support for such community archives—both in terms of expertise and institutional backing—remain critical topics for the future.

In the conversations presented here, the notion of involving witnesses directly in communication with audiences was not addressed. Instead, the focus was on the professional work of historians, videographers, archivists, and exhibition designers, who mediate the voices of witnesses for later transmission to audiences. Iuliia Skubytska, however, reflects on the potential for more participatory approaches that extend beyond the witnesses' passive "authorization" or approval of the final media product:

"It is also crucial to me that we continue to communicate and discuss these experiences, to stay connected to the process of interviewing <...> For example, Olha Chystotina, a wonderful photographer, made a striking visual representation of one of our interviewee's comments, which inspired the idea of creating some kind of visual component for the project. This could be a participatory collaboration between photographers and storytellers to create a visual series. If we are talking about experience and how to communicate it, I think it's important to experiment with different media..." (p. 43).

The question of whether and how individuals with personal war experiences engage with the memoirs of others remains largely unexplored. What conflicts of interpretation arise? Are there dominant voices shaping a prevailing narrative framework for understanding the war? Anna Yatsenko from *After Silence* observes that some potential participants decline to share their stories because they "measure" their own experiences against those widely portrayed in the

media (p. 68). This suggests a need for projects that not only document individual stories but also incorporate the reflections of these individuals on the broader culture of memory, actively involving them in shaping the formats through which their experiences are presented. Sociologist Derya Ozkul underscores this idea, emphasizing that “if we are to undertake creative approaches, we should use the methods that participants themselves would use if they wanted to disseminate information that they think is important” (Dudman 2019, 41).

Support for community building through oral history takes many forms beyond documentation alone. For instance, initiatives from Kherson and Odesa, as highlighted in the collection, explicitly aim to reinforce local urban identities while critically (re)integrating them into the broader framework of the national Ukrainian community. In the case of Kherson, the interviews emphasize themes of resilience, vitality, and resistance—both overt and in everyday forms—against the enemy. These narratives serve to reshape and define a new image of the city:

“Kherson had a particular nuance: although it was captured, it was never truly conquered. What does resistance look like in that context? If we usually think of resistance as something that involves holding a weapon, the Kherson experience shows us that resistance can take many forms. There’s civil resistance, like the Yellow Ribbon movement, intellectual resistance, and even resistance expressed in protests and rallies” (pp. 48-49).

Thanks to the shared experiences of researcher Oleksandr Cheremisin—who himself lived under occupation—and his narrators, the recordings foster a sense of community among those with similar lived realities, enabling them to communicate and process their experiences collectively. Viktoriia Nesterenko, representing the War Childhood Museum, broadens this perspective, suggesting that the task of oral history also involves creating a shared communicative space for individuals with diverse experiences:

“For each person, these different experiences were traumatic in their own way, but people are beginning to pit their pain against one another. When we’re in pain ourselves, it’s difficult to be empathetic and compassionate toward others. It became very important for me to collect these diverse stories in order to create spaces where all of them are valued. This is where I see the museum’s crucial role as a place where these stories are preserved” (p. 110).

Similarly, Oksana Dovgopolova from *Past/Future/Art* discusses how interviews can serve as a tool for building communication between those who stayed in Odesa during the war, those who left, and those who are returning.

In particular, oral history plays a vital role in amplifying the voices of less privileged and vulnerable social groups, whose research and visibility have long been key goals in the field, rooted in a leftist and democratic tradition. The initiatives presented in the collection emphasize that including these groups in the narrative not only benefits them but also contributes to the betterment of society as a whole:

“We—or future generations—will need to write the history of the Russo-Ukrainian war, and it must be written as a cohesive narrative, not in fragmented pieces. When we do begin to write that history, we have to reflect the everyday lives of people from various social groups” (Zaremba-Kosovych, p. 85).

In the case of the advocacy organization Fight for Right, interviews represent just one aspect of its broader efforts to integrate people with disabilities. Having already been involved in advocacy before the war, the organization has been running medical evacuations and a hotline since 2022. The recorded interviews are also being used to improve service delivery by providing deeper insights into the needs and challenges faced by this community. Similarly, Mariia Shvab’s project on pregnancy and childbirth during the war, along with interviews with school teachers conducted by Nadia Ufimtseva from the Ukrainian Center for Holocaust Studies and Inha Kozlova, a sociologist at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, aimed at producing practical changes. These initiatives sought to influence government policies and improve conditions in their respective fields, demonstrating the potential for oral history not just as documentation, but as a tool for advocacy and policy change.

### **The Impact of Oral Histories on Policy and Decision-Making**

Oral history has traditionally been aimed at fostering societal change, particularly in specific professional fields where the opinions of professionals, experts, and service recipients play a crucial role in assessing effectiveness. For example, Mariia Shvab, who gathers interviews with women who have experienced pregnancy and childbirth during the war, plans to publish the findings for the international community. Her goal is to provide valuable information that can inform policy development and decision-making (p. 95). Nadia

Ufimtseva, who collected interviews with teachers, shares a similar stance:

“As we designed this project, we envisioned that the collected interviews might serve as evidence of Russian crimes in Ukraine or inform future policymaking—helping educators, shaping ministry guidelines, and identifying ways to provide support” (p. 99).

This aligns with the experiences of other countries where oral history, reflecting on massive crises and disasters, has become a foundation for policy changes. Marella Hoffmann’s work *Practicing Oral History to Improve Public Policies and Programs* (Hoffmann 2017) provides vivid examples. For instance, oral history collections on the Northern Colorado flood have informed practical lessons and led to changes in local emergency preparedness and response plans. Interviews conducted about the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone uncovered cultural behavior patterns that proved helpful in combating the infection. Retrospective interviews with healthcare providers offered insights into how to respond in the event of a recurrence. Interviews with recent war refugees in Montreal are being used in the city’s integration policies and as educational resources in schools. Hoffmann notes that, in terms of influencing policies and decisions, the most effective level is the local one—closest to people, most under their control, and most impactful on their daily lives. She emphasizes that researchers must possess skills in writing policy papers, presenting them to civil servants and lawmakers, and engaging in face-to-face meetings with authorities (Hoffmann 2017).

In the stories presented in this collection, the influence on policy is generally framed in a broader, more abstract sense, with a focus on national-level impact. Initiatives with a strong local identity, such as those from Odesa, Kherson, and Kharkiv, do not prioritize direct communication with municipalities. Instead, they position themselves in relation to the academic and civil society sectors, although they are still active in discussions about war commemoration and postwar reconstruction. For example, Oksana Dovgoplova and Olha Hvozdetzka selected activists, volunteers, and cultural figures as key witnesses—individuals who are influencing change in Odesa and across the country.

## Oral History for Justice and Equity

The use of interviews as a method spans a wide range of practices, including recruitment, journalism, academic oral history, and even courtroom testimony. Of course, the collection of evidence by forensic scientists and the practice of oral history differ significantly. However, during times of war, oral historians face a significant challenge in engaging with the documentation of crimes, even though this may not hold legal weight.

The Ukraine War Archive's collaboration with law enforcement agencies illustrates how oral history initiatives can contribute to documenting war crimes. To this end, this initiative has been conducting monitoring visits to the de-occupied territories. The previous experience of one of the archive's documenters, Yaroslav Kyryienko, was very helpful. Maria Buchelnikova mentions, "Later, we realized that while the materials we collected couldn't serve as legal evidence, they could still provide valuable tools for professionals conducting such investigations. Our overarching goal has always been justice for Ukrainians. But we also understood the importance of working within our expertise and not overstepping into areas where we lacked the necessary skills" (p. 140).

The need to record interviews now for the sake of future justice is also driven by the awareness that postwar cultures and memory systems often promote forgetting, whitewashing, or even heroizing criminals. For example, despite widespread war crimes, positive memories of the Third Reich were common in Germany after World War II, and in the 2000s, there was a positive attitude toward Slobodan Milošević in Serbia, accompanied by condoning or justifying of his actions and those of his associates (Gordy 2017). As Inha Kozlova states, "Documenting what was happening felt crucial from the very beginning of the invasion—not only because it is vital to capture these experiences, but also because this misery that is being inflicted by the Russian army and the indifference of Russian society must be remembered. When the time comes to discuss accountability, forgiveness, or attempts to 'launder' their responsibility, these crimes must not be forgotten" (pp. 99-100).

The focus on the crimes committed by Russians also reflects a response to an international demand, primarily from the media, for the most emotionally charged stories that could stir audiences both in countries geographically and mentally close to Ukraine, as well as those farther away. Andrii Usach and Anna Yatsenko from *After Silence*, as well as Oleksandr Cheremisin from Kherson University,

recall media outlets making direct requests for stories about brutality—torture and other crimes committed by the occupiers—and international grant offers that required them to work with such topics in a short timeframe, often exploiting both the storytellers and interviewers, potentially causing them repeated harm.

The projects discussed in the collection broaden the notion of justice beyond legal accountability to encompass a more philosophical and inclusive understanding—recognizing, comprehending, and validating people’s experiences. The opportunity for people to be heard and represented is central to these initiatives, which also stress the importance of including diverse voices. At the same time, achieving “fair” representation is complicated by several factors. These include formal restrictions, such as the inability to interview military personnel, and the reluctance of people with little experience in public speaking or those exhausted by constant media attention to participate. Security concerns in frontline areas and the challenges of interviewing individuals in occupied territories also limit accessibility. The personal factor is also present, as researchers rely on their own contacts and those around them to recruit participants. The comfort of a shared worldview and adherence to a supposedly established public consensus make it difficult, if not impossible, to interview those who evaded mobilization, collaborated with the occupiers, or hold pro-Russian views. Other social divisions also play a role, such as the challenges of integrating displaced people, as noted by Yevheniia Nesterovych:

“The lack of discussion and exploration of this topic within society creates many barriers. How do we incorporate the critical comments that arise in conversations so that the narrators don’t feel even more excluded later? With the military, this issue will be even more acute” (p. 121).

These reflections suggest that the pursuit of justice and post-conflict equity should extend beyond merely holding individuals accountable for past crimes, including those committed by the enemy during the war. It should also involve addressing the broader challenges of building a fairer and more inclusive post-war society within the country itself. This perspective aligns with examples from different geographical and social contexts. For instance, Sindiso Bhebhe and Mpho Ngoepe, in their study of counter-archives in South Africa, highlight that the most successful archives do not focus solely on collecting stories of the past. Instead, they also engage with people’s ongoing experiences. These archives, in addition to their re-

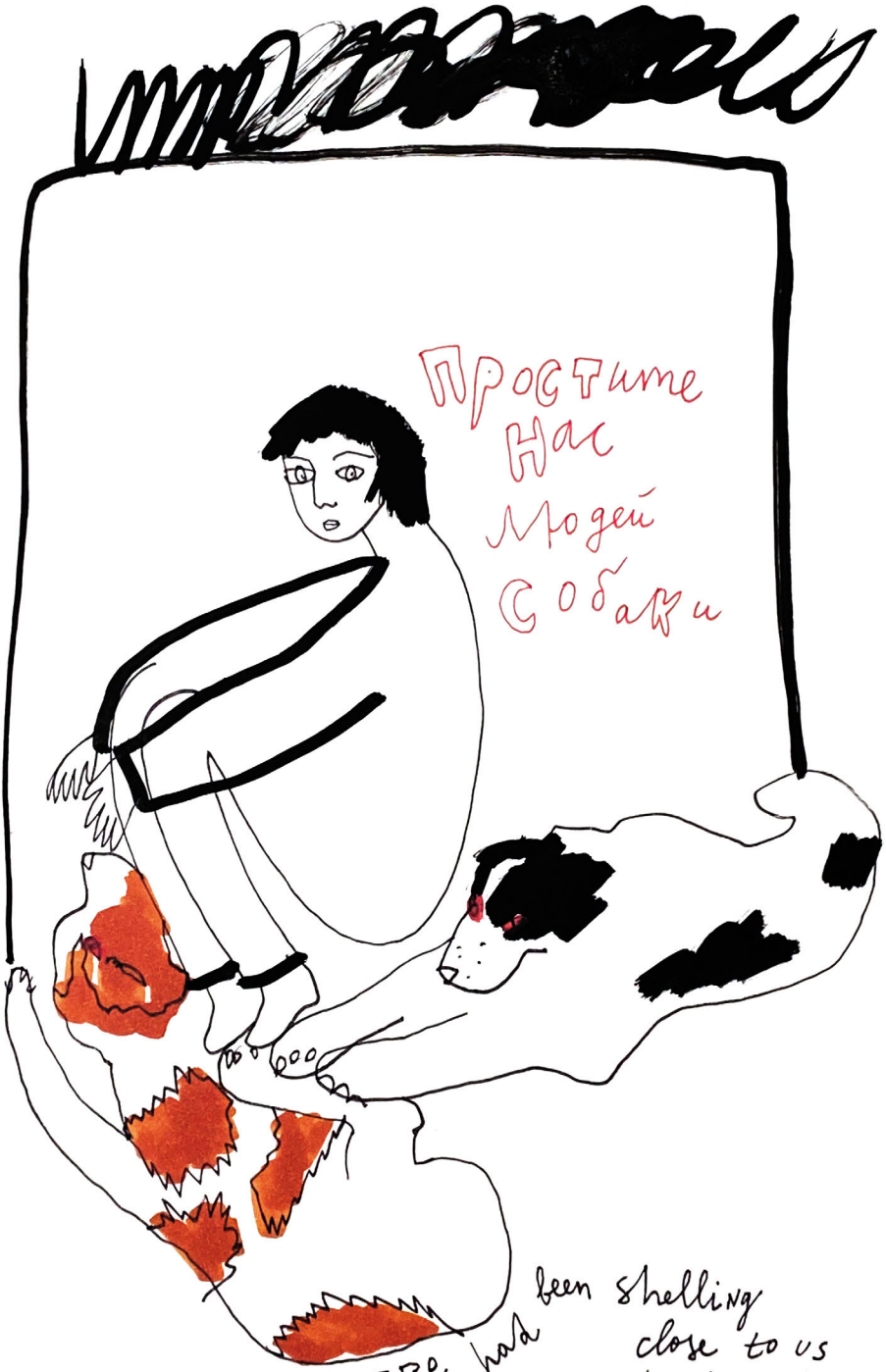
search on apartheid and past civil conflicts, have collected stories and facilitated communication and self-reflection from HIV-positive children whose parents died of AIDS, black nuns whose experiences and rights violations have long been ignored, and generally address human rights issues through interviews (Bhebhe and Ngoepe 2022).

The slogan “Everyone has a story,” used by Post Bellum, encapsulates the dual nature of oral history: it has the potential to inspire by emphasizing the value of every individual’s experience, showing that “ordinary people” have important narratives to share. At the same time, this abundance of stories can also lead to their devaluation, as some will inevitably go unheard. Oral history can unite people through dialogue, allowing for shared understanding, but it can also divide, as each person’s story is unique and shaped by different perspectives. This collection, with its diversity of approaches, self-reflection, and the exchange of experiences, highlights the evolving role of oral history in shaping the future. While it may not be able to “save” the future, it serves as a crucial resource for meaning-making.

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THERE had been shelling  
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