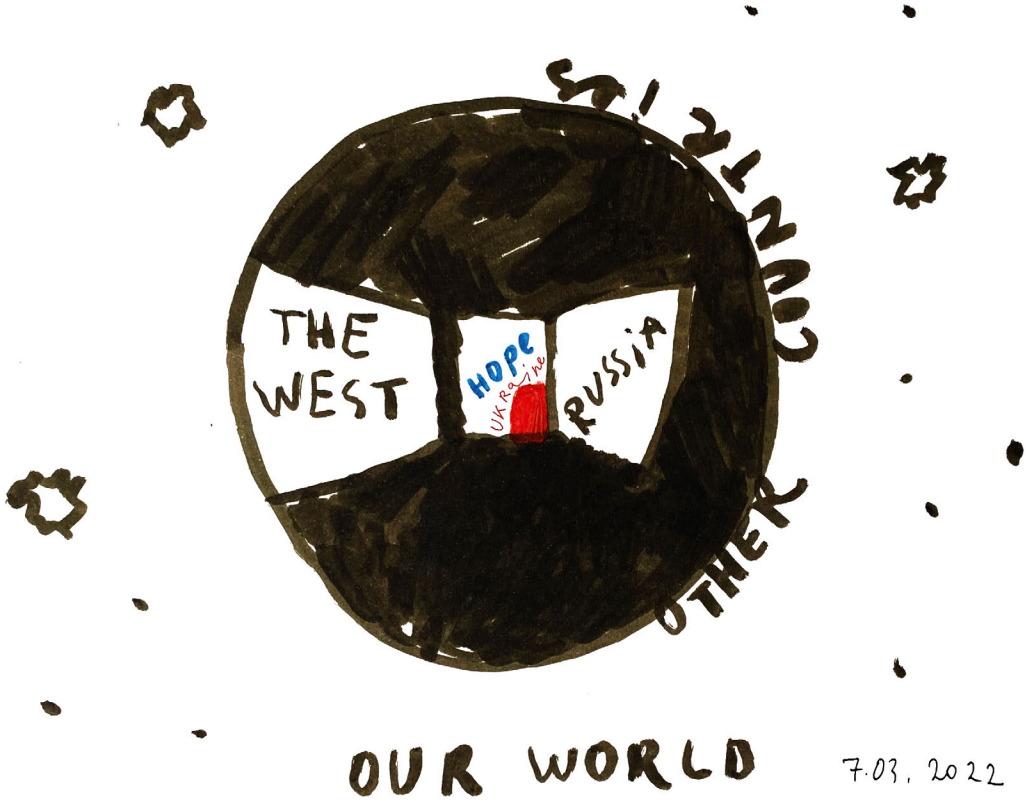
Chapter 4

Localizing Methodologies



The War Childhood Museum

Viktoriia Nesterenko and Svitlana Osipchuk on the Stories of Children and Teenagers

The conversation was recorded online on June 21, 2023

Viktoriia Nesterenko (V. N.): I am a historian and urbanist. I've been working at the War Childhood Museum since the fall of 2020. For me, this was initially a research project: to record the history of childhood. Now, it's more about the psychological component and the importance of putting experiences into words.

Svitlana Osipchuk (S. O.): I am the director of the Ukrainian office of the War Childhood Museum. I started working here as a project manager two and a half years ago. The idea of the museum appeared in the mid-2010s. One of its co-founders, Jasminko Halilovic, survived the siege of Sarajevo as a child. To begin with, he interviewed his peers in Bosnia to find out what childhood during wartime was like for them. This led to a book, and then to an institution—an archive and exhibition space where they organize events. In 2020, the Bosnian office decided to open a representative office in Ukraine. We have five people in the Ukrainian management team. As of June 2023, we have four researchers working with us and three more are in the process of joining. The museum's team also includes transcriptionists and a psychologist-psychotherapist.

Natalia Otrishchenko (N. O.): If you can recall what brought you to this work, what motivated you to start working specifically with children's stories?

S. O.: I've worked for a long time in non-formal human rights education, which I entered through studying and teaching Holocaust history. This field has already developed a large set of approaches

to creating sources, archiving, and using them. This is where it all began.

■ **V. N.:** I have a somewhat similar story. I've been working with children and with non-formal education for many years. And I've always eagerly participated in historical research projects. Working with the museum combines my interests: research, education, and social work. Over time, my motivation deepened, because I discovered that when you just talk to a child or an adult about their traumatic experience, in a friendly manner, sharing thoughts, the person recounts one thing, and when you take a recorder, sit down in front of them, and say: "Tell me. I'm all ears for an hour and a half, or two hours," then the story emerges in a completely different way. And it's important to preserve it.

As for my current motivation, we now have people in our country with very different experiences: those who stayed in Kharkiv and those who left Kharkiv; those who stayed in Halychyna and those who left Halychyna[1]; those who were in Bakhmut. 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.

■ **S. O.:** I have something to add to that. It's important to me that they are not only preserved but also serve the community after being recorded. We likely have a shorter path to the audience compared to other projects focused on different aspects of documentation. We know that an exhibition project is planned, and we can use these materials. Now we're analyzing our archive of materials collected before the full-scale invasion, and I want all these stories to be put to work. After February 24, 2022, I've been thinking more and more that the person who shared their story deserves to see their contribution.

■ **N. O.:** When did your museum team resume recording stories after the full-scale invasion began?

■ **S. O.:** We had 2022 planned out. We knew we would be organizing exhibitions—one was completed in Kherson in early February, and another was planned for Odesa in May, but none of that

1 Halychyna – a historical region in the west of Ukraine also known by its Polish-derived name Galicia (editor's note).

happened. Before the full-scale invasion, we had about 140 interviews already recorded. Based on this material, we decided to hold seminars and trainings on how to talk about the war, what needs to be known when it comes to children's experiences, and how to discuss certain topics, losses, changes. We organized these events online throughout last year, and in December 2022, we held a meeting at the Refugee Center in Kraków. There, we came up with the idea that we would try and observe ourselves, the children, and their parents to determine whether there was any readiness for interviews at all, and how suitable or interesting it might be for children currently living abroad. Those few conversations were quite informative, and afterward, we began to think that we could resume recording in the near future. Viktoriia can tell things from her point of view.

- **V. N.:** For me, returning to professional activities was part of getting back to normal, and I wanted to resume my work at the museum. Svitlana and I talked a lot about ethics and how ready children are to discuss what happened to them. In January 2023, we recorded the first interview since the start of the full-scale invasion, and I noticed how quickly some experiences fade. When some children begin sharing their stories, it feels like some details are already starting to blur.
- **N. O.:** Let's talk about the specifics of working with children.
- **S. O.:** I can speak as the mentor of this entire process. The central office [in Sarajevo] is currently working on interviewing children and young people who have experienced various wars and conflicts. They're trying to generalize their approaches. We took certain things from them, but we had to adapt this to our realities, of course. In general, the idea is that we have a certain set of documents that a researcher needs to read, along with a questionnaire. After the start of the full-scale invasion, we shortened and revised the questionnaire to avoid provoking strong emotional reactions. However, traumatic experiences can vary significantly, and you can never know what exactly will be a trigger.

The key point, and one of the main aspects of our work, is that everything at every stage must be voluntary. But, at the same time, this works a bit differently for children. Children still connect their actions to what they think adults expect from them. Parents (or guardians, any significant adults) are particularly influential. We've seen a lot of different reactions. Sometimes, parents try to protect their child in every way possible and don't want them to have any contact with anyone, no matter what the situation is. And that's understandable. Sometimes, on the contrary, it's the parents who want their child to

talk. This is also a challenge for the museum: not taking advantage of such situations and ensuring that the child is truly voluntarily involved and comfortable. Therefore, researchers must repeatedly remind children and their parents that they can stop participating at any time.

■ **V. N.:** You have to build interaction with both children and adults so that they start telling their stories. With children, this can be more challenging. However, since I look quite youthful, children—especially teenagers—sometimes take me for one of their own. Besides, it's a constant search for common ground—moments, interests, hobbies, anything that can help break the ice a bit.

I also adapt to the child. If they keep their distance, I keep mine. If they cry, I get empathetically involved in their story. If they joke about very difficult topics that I wouldn't laugh at in my normal life, I can still smile and share that emotion. It's important for me to create a space where the child's story is accepted and to show them that everything here follows their rules as much as possible. Starting with the simplest things: "Are you thirsty? Aren't you cold? Do you want to take a break? Remember, you don't have to answer if you don't feel like it." And then there are broader issues, like the presence of parents: "Do you want your parents to be present? How would you feel more comfortable?" I completely agree with Svitlana that children's consent is a very complicated thing.

■ **N. O.:** Listening to you, I'm thinking about what our courses on interviewing look like. The default assumption is usually that we will talk to people older than us, those who have lived through a particular situation, who remember the past, and can tell us how things used to be. When it comes to oral history, interviews about World War II and the Holocaust often serve as a model. We then speak to older people, for whom it's a recollection of their youth and childhood. How did you learn to work with children whose history unfolds in close chronological proximity to the moment of its recording?

■ **S. O.:** I took part in the PresentPast program from AMCHA Germany, a professional development program for those working with vulnerable groups who have experienced collective violence. It provided me with a lot of insights into how to recognize my own vulnerability as a researcher working with others, how to recognize someone else's vulnerability, and how to discuss it. Although it wasn't specifically focused on recording oral history testimonies, it was very, very important for me as a specialist working with trauma and traumatic

experiences. There's also constant learning during the work itself. I learn a lot from our researchers.

■ **V. N.:** I first came across oral history when I was studying at the History Department of Karazin University. Then, I transcribed interviews for some projects, and it was a real practical exercise. When you transcribe, you listen: "Yeah, the person asked the question this way, and it was answered like that; and here the person said something like this, and it was clear that the respondent was uncomfortable." You listen to the interviews and learn, you learn all the time.

At the same time, I entered the social sector. We worked a lot with orphans and participated in training programs that emphasized the storytelling aspect, specifically, when a child tells their story. This is how I first encountered trauma in practice, or more precisely, storytelling during recovery from traumatic experiences. So, by the time I started working at the museum, I already had psychological training.

I can't agree that there is a major difference in interviewing people from older and younger generations. When we record stories about the traumatic experiences of older people, in my experience, it often feels like it happened just yesterday for them. And sometimes, they can even react more emotionally than children, because they already understand what the norm is—and that they did not have this norm because of their history. That is, these experiences are still vivid, and they hurt. But the context is constantly changing. You must continually learn in order to understand how to avoid harming the person you're interviewing.

■ **N. O.:** To what extent did you need to adapt the methodology your Bosnian colleagues offered to the situation in Ukraine, where the war was ongoing—and still is?

■ **S. O.:** When we started recording in Ukraine, it was 2018. What absolutely wouldn't have worked for us—and what may have already been changed at the central office—were the questions about any possible loss. We decided not to use them. We excluded them from our questionnaires in any form. We never ask children whether they witnessed a tragic event, saw violence or death. We ask more about the changes from pre-war "normalcy" to the new "normalcy" shaped by the war or hostilities. We talk about what the daily routine was like, how schooling took place, what games were played, and what has changed. Even these questions often reveal a significant shift, a narrowing access to education and security.

As an institution, we are constantly learning, and we are now at a stage where we can work with the central office to understand, in practical terms, what this experience can offer them.

■ **V. N.:** Some things—like the questionnaire, for example—change constantly. The logic of the conversation we had built before the full-scale invasion involved starting with easier questions, then moving on to more difficult experiences, and then gradually bringing the child to their normal, current life with questions about everyday life and favorite foods. The last questions were always very motivating. Even the children themselves, when we asked them, "Is there anything else you'd like to add?", would often start a kind of motivational speech. In other words, we were able to end the interview on such a strong positive note, even though Donbas was still occupied.

And now, since we're still in this episode, it's quite difficult to end an interview. You're constantly looking at the child, searching for that question to wrap up the conversation. For example, some children respond very well to the question about how they imagine our victory. And sometimes it's very difficult, especially when the child has started telling their story, but is still inside it. And when you ask them, "How do you spend your free time?", they answer: "I sit in a bomb shelter". That's why you must look for the right way to end each interview, so that the child can move on after this.

■ **S. O.:** Another challenge is that children often believe we can't be interested in their story because it's too mundane, thinking that we're only looking for extreme experiences. We are working on a way to communicate more clearly that everyday life is just as interesting and important to us in any form. And then, I hope, more people will want to share their stories with us, because it's not necessary to only testify about something extremely traumatic—it's important to tell your unique story.

■ **N. O.:** Yes, this is something Viktoriia has already mentioned: certain hierarchies of experiences emerge, and based on them, we decide whether we want to share our story or not. Therefore, we need to address this somehow and show different stories, because there is no single way to live through the war.

Together with the narrators you are listening to or whose transcripts you are reading, you experience very different emotions. This overlaps with your personal life circumstances and the challenges of a threatened existence. How do you cope in these conditions, and how do you take care of yourselves?

■ **S. O.:** For me, therapy is essential. I think it's crucial for anyone who works with traumatic experiences. I also do sports and pay close attention to my bodily reactions. For instance, an interview with a girl from Mariupol had a profound impact on me, pushing me beyond my physical and psychological limits. I crossed this boundary quickly because I missed the moment when I should've stopped. Later, I discussed it a lot with our transcriptionist who transcribed the interview.

This situation became a reminder of how careful we need to be in our work and that both researchers and transcribers need support as well. We are currently in the process of developing a support system for our colleagues because we, too, are in the middle of a war. We live in war, we work with it, so we must be very mindful of our well-being as well as that of our colleagues.

■ **V. N.:** The stories I recorded for the museum didn't throw me off balance; on the contrary, they helped me a lot. I live in Saltivka in Kharkiv. On February 24, 2022, at five in the morning, we woke up to explosions. In that situation, when missiles were flying overhead and you didn't know where to run, the stories of my narrators became my guiding light. They kept me going. It was the moment when I knew there were people who had gone through a similar experience, who had lived through the crappiest scenarios, so I will cope with this too. Their stories aren't over, and neither are ours.

Besides, I have basic psychological hygiene in my life: psychotherapy, physical activity, sleep, enough food, and talking about situations that have had a strong impact on me.

■ **N. O.:** It's valuable that for you, interviews are not solely about secondary trauma but also about the hope that we draw from stories. It's equally important that when we talk about initiatives to collect and preserve testimonies of the war, we emphasize not only the interactions between interviewer and interviewee, which are central to our work, but also other types of relationships with the stories that may be difficult. It's about the experience of transcribers, as well as immersion in the story through reading and processing it. This contribution and emotional effort should be acknowledged, appreciated, and made visible.

We're now in the midst of one of the most documented wars. While we're currently recording the testimonies, the question arises: what will happen to them next? This brings us to considerations about archiving and access to archived materials.

■ **S. O.:** This is a big question for us. At a recent seminar, I heard the opinion that while the event is ongoing, there should be no access to

archives. I agree with this idea in the sense that as long as the people who have shared some personal information are alive, and if the institution can't be completely certain of all the potential consequences of publication (and it can't always be 100% certain), then access to the archive should at least be carefully moderated, if not restricted. At the same time, if nothing is done with the materials we've collected this year in the coming years, then why did we collect them in the first place? That's a big question.

We're building our archive with the intention of eventually opening it to researchers. At the same time, our researchers who collect the interviews can access the materials anytime—of course, after discussing it with us beforehand. Since the interviews have been entrusted to the museum's archive, we're also responsible for them. If someone shares their story with us, they have the right to expect that we'll handle it with respect, avoid complicating their life, and refrain from making decisions on their behalf that they never consented to.

■ **V. N.:** I can share my experience as someone who wrote an article based on the museum's material. It was a situation where there was a tension between me as a researcher and me as a responsible person. As a researcher, I need to provide as many details as possible—social status, city of origin, and some personal situations that shape a person and their perception. But Svitlana and I agreed this wasn't the way to approach it at the time. For example, I even gave the person's age as a range and described the location as "a town with up to 100,000 inhabitants." There were a lot of restrictions. At the same time, I sent this article to my respondents whose interviews I used. I was interested in hearing their feedback. Those of them who read my text said that it was really cool and useful. They thanked us for working with their experiences in such a way.

On the one hand, we need the archive to be open because we are not collecting all of this to be filed away—we need these stories to live on. But on the other hand, imagine a researcher from, let's say, London coming in, opening an interview, and reading some phrases that reflect Russian propaganda. That researcher, who isn't familiar with the situation at all, then writes that she has found documentary evidence, a person's testimony. Therefore, we bear the responsibility for oral sources because they aren't about hard facts but rather about a person's emotions and experiences. How do we handle this aspect? How do we regulate it at the level of access? I don't have any ideas yet.

■ **N. O.:** That's why we're having these conversations and together mapping our way toward the questions that need to be discussed and that may even remain unanswered. Your arguments made me think about the balance of power in producing knowledge about our region, and who holds more expertise when it comes to talking about the Russo-Ukrainian war. We need to reconsider this, ensuring that we are still asked for our comments. Nothing about us without us.

My last question to you is: what advice would you give to people who decide to engage in documentation?

■ **S. O.:** My advice is simple: it's very important to get to know yourself well, to build a very good and extensive self-support system for yourself, to work on your own skills of self-reflection and self-monitoring. That is, not only reflection, but also observation of your physical reactions. This will be very informative. And it's important on many levels. Firstly, your own well-being and understanding of your own limits, the psychological and physical capabilities of the body—these form the basis for working with traumatic experience. Secondly, it's important not to bring your own experiences into the interview in a form that will be destructive for the respondent. Maintaining balance in working with trauma is possible when one knows oneself very well and understands why one is doing it. Nowadays, there are and will be many reasons why this balance may be violated, because you always want to do more; but if you don't start with yourself, the consequences may be difficult.

■ **V. N.:** I'd like to add just one aspect—responsibility. Responsibility to those whose stories we collect. It's important to keep this in mind so that you're not just chasing after some crappy story or a super-discovery, but simply taking responsibility for the story of the person sitting in front of you.