Why I Record Interviews with Ukrainian Refugees: An Attempt at Autoethnography

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Abstract. In this article I try to explain the main reasons for my project: people want their stories to be preserved. In interviews with them, people said for example, "although someone is interested in this", "now [after the interview] it's a little easier for me", "at last I can talk about it". The interviewees were the people I met in Ukrainian refugees help centres. They are people who have decided to live; many people are depressed and are silent. I can't help them, but I have to know who they are as this helps me understand other refugees. Hot-trace records help to track the dynamics of the narrative tradition about the refugee experience, both now and in the future. I consider this project to be a professional duty.

The most important characteristic of the interviews I recorded is that they were conducted using participant observation, because I was in similar conditions to other refugees. This method made it possible to draw important conclusions about the reasons for refusing interviews, favourite and taboo topics in the stories, and the influence of grand narratives on what the storytellers say. Being among refugees made it possible to see how different the situations of Ukrainians abroad are: some live with their whole families, while others live with an unhealed wound due to the loss of a relative; someone has a husband on the front line, someone has relatives left behind in the occupied areas; someone has lost a home, community of neighbours, job, and someone has left a more or less peaceful territory in search of a better life, taking advantage of the opportunities extended to Ukrainians through temporary protection.

A typical reaction of storytellers to their own interviews is to note that the conversation had a positive effect on their psychological self-organisation. People are grateful that they were listened to, that they were able to understand a lot for themselves; they are pleased that their story was interesting to someone else. This, among other things, is the importance of our work.

Keywords: Ukrainian oral narrative tradition; Russia–Ukraine war; Ukrainian refugees; participant observation; autoethnography

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.12697/IL.2025.30.2.3

Introduction: The Context of Recording

This autoethnographic study emerged as a result of long-term scientific work that was conducted in conditions that were new for me when I became part of the social group I was researching, i.e. the community of Ukrainian refugees in three European countries, and through the use of participant observation. Autoethnography as a method of qualitative research emerged in the 1980s as a reaction to the desire of researchers to overcome invasive colonial ethnographic practices. Cultural anthropologists sought to rethink the ways of implementing their work and presenting scientific findings (Adams 2015: 10). Such a rethinking gave grounds to understand that the researcher is part of the research, and that the culture of origin influences the proposed scientific results. Gradually, ethnographers abandoned the familiar and condescending term 'exotic cultures', during the study of which the researcher was *a priori* at a higher level compared to the object of research. Ethnography, as with other social sciences, gradually developed a policy and ethics for the field and for archival work, incrementally changing the approaches and philosophy of research.

Already at the beginning of the change in ethnographic research, as it moved towards autoethnography, scientists began to think about the question of whether their work harms the people they study (Adams 2015: 12). Researchers had in mind the moral and psychological aspects of relationships with the people and societies they study. This question arose much more acutely for Ukrainian anthropologists, ethnologists, sociologists, oral historians, folklorists during the war, that is, during the study of an ongoing event. Researchers, on the one hand, sought to preserve the personal data of the storytellers who expressed their desire and wrote something during the interviews, and on the other hand, were afraid to make this data public in case the front line changed and part of Ukraine was occupied, or reoccupied, thus potentially putting the interviewees in danger of persecution because of the information they had provided. After all, today Ukrainian scientists, unlike journalists who rush for lurid headlines and intriguing information, hide the names of the storytellers, do not provide photos of people living in the border areas with Russia, or of people who have relatives in the ranks of the Armed Forces, or of people who still live in occupied Ukrainian territory.

Among modern Ukrainian researchers who use autobiographical interviews as a source, the question of the ethics and safety of their work arose. Everyone understood the value of early recordings, when people's memories had not yet been influenced by time, had not been folklorised, had not been generalised; at the same time, when remembering tragic events during the interviews,

people relived them often crying. Ultimately, thanks to numerous meetings of researchers within the framework of conferences, round tables and symposiums, which often took place via Zoom meetings, some basic rules of work were developed, including:

- you can only talk to people who are in safe a position, psychologically balanced, and have basic means of subsistence;
- in the publications of interviews, remove information that could harm the respondent, primarily accurate personal data;
- urge the narrator not to talk about facts that may affect the course of military events, for example, the location of military equipment cannot be mentioned; the respondent is warned that the conversation is being recorded and will be archived for processing;
- if a person who has suffered a serious loss due to the war is working with a psychologist and wants to give an interview, then it is necessary to wait until the end of therapy.

It is necessary to find the right approach for each narrator and be grateful that she or he shared the story. At the same time, psychologists who work with families who have lost relatives due to the war claim that such people are not offended or triggered by attention to them, but it is painful for them when someone celebrates a holiday too joyfully at a time when many families are mourning their dead.

My research took place in a mental space that was between not accepting the reality of the war, believing in Ukraine's Victory, and understanding the value of early records, at a time when my country was losing its best sons and daughters to Russia's imperial ambitions.

Since the very beginning of Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, I have been recording interviews with people who had wartime experiences. In total, I have recorded approximately 130 conversations in Ukraine, Poland, France, and Finland. During this time, I have given four interviews at different times. In this article, I will try to find out why I, like many other researchers, have been actively recording interviews about the wartime experience of Ukrainians, and how the life circumstances in which I found myself have influenced my scientific work. Recordings of autobiographical accounts of wartime experiences were carried out especially intensely during the first two years of the full-scale invasion, with their intensity decreasing somewhat during the third year of Russia's great war against Ukraine.

My story as a refugee

Before the active phase, and at the very beginning of the Ukrainian-Russian war, the likelihood of which few people believed, there was a stereotypical idea in Kyiv that it was better to spend the war somewhere in a remote village, that it would be safer there, than in the capital, which would definitely be attacked and which could become uninhabitable when electricity, water, gas, and food supplies disappeared. On February 24, 2022, after the first bombings, people left the capital for villages and towns near Kyiv. Some of these people later found themselves under occupation, since it was the settlements around Kyiv that suffered the first military strikes and/or ended being occupied.

When it became clear that a full-scale war had begun, my husband insisted on taking us out of Kyiv. The children asked me what they should take with them. I replied that they should pack as if they were going on a two-week trip. In general, people had the idea that this was a temporary phenomenon, that it was some kind of misunderstanding and that everything would end quickly. I thought so too. At the same time, when I asked my husband how I should pack, he replied: "Pack as if you were never coming back here again." From the very beginning, unlike many people who did not believe in the possibility of war in the 21st century, my husband was preparing for a long war. In addition to basic necessities and food, I took with me two favourite icons, ethnographic embroidered clothes, and two albums of family photos. We left Kyiv the next day, February 25, 2022. After this trip, I returned home in July 2022, that is, after six months.

The village of Sobolivka, Makariv district, Kyiv region, where I was from February 25 to March 7, 2022, was not occupied, but we constantly heard and saw from afar the shelling and bombing of the cities of Makariv, Borodyanka, and knew about the fighting on the Zhytomyr highway. During my stay in this village, the neighbouring villages of Korolivka and Kodra came under shelling. All these locations are within a radius of 20 km from where we were staying. On March 7, 2022, when it became clear that the danger of occupation was increasing, we walked to the village of Kodra, from where we were evacuated to Lviv. During this time, I recorded several conversations with our hostess, Leonida Panchyk, born in 1939. She is a talented storyteller who remembered the events of World War II and each time recalled what it was like at that time, compared the current and previous situation, and shared her impressions. Later, this storyteller gave written consent to the publication and processing of her story. The uniqueness of Ms Leonida's memories lies in the fact that they were not made at the request of the researcher but arose as a direct reaction to the events of the war; they are records of the living existence of the Ukrainian narrative tradition. The results of the analysis of these notes have already been published (Koval-Fuchylo 2023).

The impetus for recording Ms Leonida's memories was her desire to tell her story, and I began recording these testimonies, since I had long-term experience of professional recording as a folklorist. Ms Leonida's stories aroused my keen interest, since we experienced unusual events together, and it was my first time experiencing wartime, although she remembered the hardships of World War II. I could not ignore such an interesting respondent. The total duration of the recorded conversations is 140 minutes. Thematically, they are devoted to memories of childhood during World War II, memories of her father's time in the war, the life of her mother and young children at that time, the post-war period, Ms Leonida's wedding, and her husband's illness. The recordings are the narrator's direct reaction to events of the Russia–Ukraine war as she was experiencing them here and now; they are so-called spontaneous, not stimulated, narratives (in the words of Anniki Kaivola-Bregenhøj (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 1996: 48)) and were not answers to the interviewer's questions. The plots of the memories unfold in an associative-logical sequence, when one memory revives subsequent experiences in memory. The choice of plots depends on the recording situation and the respondent's life experience. In our case, all the plots of the recorded memories are directly or indirectly connected with the place of recording – our narrator's house.

From April 2 to mid-July 2022, I lived with my two daughters in the Łódź Voivodeship in the Republic of Poland. Like all Ukrainians who ended up abroad due to the war, I had to visit administrative institutions to prepare the necessary documents. There, I met people from different regions of Ukraine. Many of them were ready to share their stories. Often, centres for Ukrainian refugees became places for conversation. Such locations were organised in many cities in Poland. In these locations, you could get clothes, food, and basic necessities. It is important that you could have lunch there, drink tea, and visit play areas for children. In these places, it was convenient for me to record mothers' stories while their children were playing. My main recording location was the Łódź House of Culture, where I recorded between April and June 2022. In Łódź, Ukrainians also gathered around the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church, located at 60 Sinkewicza Street in a chapel next to the Church of the Most Holy Name of Jesus, where Ukrainians have the opportunity to attend liturgy every Sunday. Organising centres for refugees due to war and/or political persecution is a typical practice in various countries around the world. Refugee researchers often start their work from these places (Kość-Ryżko 2013).

In France, I lived in Paris from September 2022 to the end of February 2023. I also recorded interviews in aid centres, primarily in the premises of Ukraine for All at 6 Palestine Street. Sunday-school classes were organised here

for Ukrainian children, and the Ukrainian Church of St Symon operates on the first floor.

I lived in Helsinki from March to December 2023. The Society of Ukrainians in Finland's Cultural Centre has been operating here for a long time and various events for adults and children have been organised. Children draw, sculpt from clay, learn Finnish, and there is a library. Thanks to the activities of such Ukrainian centres abroad, it is much easier for Ukrainian women and their children to spend the period of the war away from home. This cultural centre was my main place for recording interviews in Finland.

Since December 22, 2023, I have been living in Kyiv.

Why I Record Interviews; Why People Agree to Interviews

Peoples' desire to know other people's stories and their willingness to listen and tell their own stories among Ukrainian refugees at the beginning of the full-scale war was enormous. People sincerely wanted to know how others managed to escape, they were ready to both listen to others and talk about themselves, so my decision to record other people's stories was quite natural. The stories of people who had had to save themselves and their relatives from war for the first time in their lives were heard all around me. That is, from the very beginning I was in a situation of self-exploration, reflecting on other people's situations and comparing my story with theirs.

In autoethnographic research it is important, first, to go beyond the hierarchy in the researcher–researched relationship, second, to adhere to ethical standards, and third, to remember social responsibility (Doboszewska 2023: 267). It was not difficult for me to adhere to the first position, since all my interviews with Ukrainian refugees abroad were conducted using the method of participant observation. I recorded conversations with women who were refugees, and at the same time I was a refugee. My listening position was different in that I did not simply listen to the stories; I asked permission to record them on a Dictaphone. The women could give their real names, or they could take a pseudonym. I informed them about the purpose of my research, which was to preserve and analyse stories of their experiences of surviving the war. The ethicality of my approach to recording interviews during the war was that a person who agreed to be interviewed could choose their own name and roughly indicate their place of residence. As a social responsibility to my storytellers, I have changed their names for safety reasons. If the storyteller has relatives who remained in the occupied territories, I omit details that could identify these people.

Ukrainian researchers of wartime oral histories are trying to understand the situation they found themselves in because of the war. For example, Ukrainian sociologist Natalia Otrishchenko conducted and published 14 interviews with researchers who recorded stories from the first months of the full-scale invasion (Otrishchenko 2024). These researchers emphasise the importance of early recordings, before the testimonies have been influenced by subsequent historical events and the testimonies of others (Otrishchenko 2024: 71, 158), that is, to use a term from folkloristics, testimonies that have not been folklorised.

The reasons that motivated researchers to conduct autobiographical oral history interviews can be divided into three main groups:

- personal motives;
- external stimuli;
- secondary motivation.

Personal research motives include self-awareness: I am conducting interviews because I know how to do it thanks to my previous scientific experience (Otrishchenko 2024: 97, 107). In addition, in the current situation, there was a desire to do something useful for the common cause. It was necessary to fight constant anxiety, to switch attention from individual experiences to active actions (Otrishchenko 2024: 146). Conversations about war experiences, refugee experiences, and adaptation to a new country were a kind of therapy. Thus, after the conversation, some women told me that they now understood a lot for themselves, that the conversation helped them organise their thoughts. This therapeutic effect was also noticed by other researchers (Otrishchenko 2024: 102).

Among the external stimuli that influenced me as a researcher was the opportunity to record conversations about a completely new experience that was difficult to compare with previous experiences because Ukrainians had never had to flee war and adapt to new conditions before. When I learned about the opportunities to work abroad, I decided to take advantage of these offers. Special grants made it possible for me to work in Poland, France, and Finland.

A secondary motivation for my work on the oral history of refugees is the desire to archive a history of this war and the refugees it caused. When I explained the purpose of my research to potential storytellers, one of them supported me with the following remark: "We have to do this so that later they don't say that it didn't happen." This remark is a short but very telling reflection of the historical experience of the Ukrainian people. We had already experienced the Soviet period, when mention of the terrible events of the Holodomor, the huge human losses in World War II, and other terrible historical events were prohibited.

Archiving provides material for future processing, dissemination, historical memory, preservation of the memory of war and, further, the formation of public opinion. Ultimately, the global goal of such work is to achieve justice (Otrishchenko 2024: 166) and punish the aggressor for starting a war. The stories recorded by oral historians can become supporting material for future trials against the Russian occupiers.

My colleague, anthropologist Tina Polek, in her report at the meeting of the folklore commission of the Shevchenko Scientific Society on December 11, 2024, considered the question of why people agree to an interview. She identified the following reasons: people seek to convey their truth, they want to feel important, they do not mind helping the researcher, they will have informal contact with a person who could be useful to them (Polek 2024). I agree with these conclusions, but at the same time I can supplement them with my own observations. For example, among my respondents was a woman who wanted her story to be recorded in Ukrainian. She realised that she would probably no longer be able to live in her homeland. She married a foreigner, her daily languages are now English and French, so it was important for her to record her story in her native Ukrainian.

Among my respondents were six people from Mariupol, five women and one man, a defender of the city, a former prisoner who returned from Russian captivity through a prisoner exchange. These people did not just want to tell their story; they wanted to testify about their stay in Mariupol during the bombing of their city in the spring of 2022. Olena's (name changed) husband was detained and killed by the occupiers during filtration in Mariupol. She didn't agree to the interview right away, I waited for half a year for her to be ready after working with a psychologist. When, one day after our conversation, other women asked Olena where she had been, she replied that she had been telling her story. Someone said, "How long can we talk about this?" To which Olena said, "Well, we need to talk about Mariupol." The stories of Mariupol residents differ from all other stories in that Mariupol residents do not justify their decision to leave Ukraine, they do not need to explain that they were saving themselves and their children. Their stories are the testimonies of eyewitnesses who became winners because they survived where many people died, and they now need to tell others about this.

People agree to be interviewed because they want their story to be saved and because they like to know that they are becoming part of a larger effort to collect and preserve testimonies. My colleague, folklorist Nadiya Pastukh, noted that one of her respondents said that she agreed to be interviewed because everyone told her that she was a good storyteller, so why not record her story. In April 2022, in Łódź, when asked to give an interview a woman told me:

"Well, if I have to thank Poland, then I am ready." The idea that one should be deeply grateful to countries that agreed to accept refugees was very common at the beginning of the war.

So, there are many reasons for agreeing to an interview. The main ones are to convey one's truth; to testify to those who are interested in listening to them; and to simply share one's story. At the same time, the motives can be completely different. I learn about these from the articles of researchers who worked in countries after genocide and war. For example, Alexander, a participant in the crime of genocide in Rwanda in 1994, tried to use the interview situation as an opportunity to force the listener to accept his truth, demand respect for his rights, and legitimise his interpretation of events (Jessee 2011: 295). Refugees can also testify in order to encourage listeners, citizens of other countries, to influence the governments of their countries in order to change refugee policies (Westerman 1998: 225, 226). The stories I heard were told for me as a refugee, as were my storytellers: they are stories told for a potential Ukrainian listener. I suppose that if the interviewer had been another person, for example a foreign journalist or a social worker from the country that granted the narrator temporary protection status, the story might have been somewhat different. For example, narrators could have focused listeners attention on those characteristics that would help narrators adapt to a new place.

The limits of my research

My last storyteller in Poland was Yevheniya (name changed) from Mariupol. She did not immediately agree to the conversation; I waited for her consent for more than a month. At that time, July 2022, Yevheniya was already working in Poland, and her children attended a Polish school. After the interview, when I had already turned off the recorder, I thanked Yevheniya for agreeing to tell her story, told her to hold on, and said that she had already won because she was able to save herself and her two children. Yevheniya replied: "I am fine, but my friend is lying on the sofa with her nose against the wall and does not want anything." I realised that researchers cannot meet those refugees who are depressed and do not visit help centres. I cannot help such people, but it is important to understand that, in addition to people who decided to live and try to adapt abroad, there are also people who need psychological help and might never become our interlocutors.

After talking with Yevheniya, I began to think about which categories of Ukrainian refugee would not be included among my storytellers. Since I worked in Ukrainian cultural centres in both France and Finland, it can be assumed that the women who visited these centres wanted to preserve their

Ukrainian identity. These cultural centres organised art groups for children, such as drawing, clay modelling, applique, etc., and had Sunday-schools where children could learn Ukrainian and communicate with other Ukrainian children. Not all refugees found it important to visit such places; many people who did not plan to return to Ukraine focused all their attention on adapting to their new country of residence.

The longest time I spent abroad was 10 months in Finland. During this time, I regularly visited the Society of Ukrainians in Finland's Ukrainian Cultural Centre, located in Helsinki. My youngest daughter, like the children of other refugees, attended classes for Ukrainian children. Later, some women who also came to this centre became my storytellers and I got to know many of them quite well. Thanks to this I realised that women who are abroad with their husbands often refuse to be interviewed. The men ended up abroad for various reasons, for example, some of them worked here before the full-scale invasion, and after February 24, 2022, their wives came to them with their children. It is clear that such women feel much better abroad, compared to women who ended up here alone with children and their husbands becoming soldiers in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. In my opinion, the reason for refusing to be interviewed is influenced by the grand narrative according to which men should fight, not hide abroad. This is why women do not really disclose that they are abroad with their husbands. I often found this out by accident, for example when I accidently saw a woman with her husband on the way to the cultural centre.

My colleague Tetyana Shevchuk has been in Vienna since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. She concluded that women who work unofficially refuse to be interviewed. Perhaps they simply do not want to draw unnecessary attention to themselves.

From my observations, I concluded that women who planned to change their country of residence also refused to be interviewed. I think this is since, according to the grand narrative, refugees should be grateful for the help provided and not look for better conditions. Looking for better conditions means that a woman does not just hope to sit out the war in a safe place but is looking for conditions for her family under which she will be able to never return.

My collection also includes the story of a woman named Victoria (name changed), whose husband was a civilian prisoner of war in Russia at the time of the interview. Victoria tried her best to have him released; she contacted various human rights organisations and the Red Cross. Later, her husband was released from prison, but the Russian authorities did not want to release him from the occupied territory. Then Victoria destroyed all her data on the Internet so as not to harm her husband. She also asked me if I had distributed

her data anywhere, because it could harm her husband in leaving the occupied area. I had not written about Victoria anywhere. In the end, her husband was released, so at least this story has a happy end. This story taught me to keep all names secret.

Other researchers also ponder the reasons for refusing interviews. For example, Oleksandr Cheremisin, who records interviews in Ukraine, noted: "Unfortunately, some refused for various reasons. Some do not want to tell anything, some are afraid of the management at work, some are very busy because after the de-occupation they decided to become volunteers, and some are already tired of interviews. With some, conversations are postponed" (Otrishchenko 2024: 48).

Two of my storytellers in Finland said that they were able to talk about themselves only after a long time, about a year after the tragic events they experienced. One of them lost her 16-year-old son. He was killed by a bomb fragment and died of blood loss during the bombing of Mariupol. Even a year and a half after his death, she cried during our conversation. And I cried with her, because it is impossible to be calm when hearing about a mother's great grief.

In the summer of 2022, researchers began to debate the ethicality of interviews with people who have to talk about tragic events. For me, the most significant was the response of the mother I mentioned. I told her: "If it's really hard for you to remember, then we can stop talking." She replied: "Nothing will hurt me anymore. I think about it all the time anyway." A well-known Ukrainian public figure, psychologist Josyf Zisels, works with families who have lost family members to the war. He said that each person needs to be approached individually, everything needs to be thought out logically, but in general, people who have suffered heavy losses due to war are not as hurt by attention as by a demonstration of excessive joy during the war, for example, fireworks during a wedding or loud music during a holiday.

Sometimes a researcher might not notice an important storyteller who does not dare to approach. This was the case with Svitlana (name changed) from Mariupol. She was visiting a Ukrainian centre in Paris. Due to her natural modesty, she did not want to approach me herself. Another friend of mine drew my attention to Svitlana. We had our first dialogue when I approached Svitlana and said that I was recording interviews with Ukrainian refugees in order to preserve their stories and further process them. Svitlana said: "I already know about you. And by the way, I am from Mariupol." That is, Svitlana hinted that I had been working here for a long time when I finally approached her. Her story is more interesting, more important, and more tragic than the stories of those who fled from less or more safe regions. Her story had many characters and

important observations of people in extreme conditions of survival. When I finally met Svitlana from Mariupol, after a friend pointed her out, her modesty had kept her from approaching me, yet her story proved far more tragic and significant than many others, offering profound insights into survival in extreme conditions.

Research Perspectives

My scientific approach to the analysis of the material was influenced by the works of Polish researchers Aneta Prymaka-Oniszk (Prymaka-Oniszk 2017) and Katarzyna Kość-Ryżko (Kość-Ryżko 2021). Thanks to their observations, I realised that it is important to be able to distance myself from the object of research; that to know that people create a certain image for self-presentation in their stories, emphasising some facts and bypassing others; that it is important to understand the subjectivity of the respondents' assessments because they can often interpret even the situation in their own family one-sidedly and very subjectively; that storytellers often do not notice or do not want to notice objective factors, and interpret historical events according to their own ideas.

For scientific analysis, the works of the Finnish folklorist Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj, who conducted interviews with Ingrians who were refugees during World War II, are important (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2006). In her works, the researcher gives a portrait of each storyteller, analyses the main narrative plots, and tries to understand what the interview meant to the narrator. My main goal during the interview is to hear what the storyteller herself wants to tell about herself. It is important for me to understand what stories Ukrainian refugees hear about others and what they tell each other about themselves. I have several interviews where I almost did not ask questions, but only listened, sometimes clarifying something. However, I have prepared an approximate list of questions:

1. Where did the war find you? How did you learn about the war, what was your first reaction?
2. Did you have any predictions about the intensification of the war?
3. What, in your opinion, were the reasons for the full-scale invasion?
4. How did you spend the first days of the active phase of the war?
5. When and why did you decide to go abroad? What prompted this decision?
6. What do you know about the fate of your relatives and neighbours?
7. What was your evacuation route abroad? Why did you choose Poland/France/Finland?
8. Who helped you? What were the obstacles, difficulties?
9. Describe your first days abroad. Who did you meet?

10. What do you expect in the near future?
11. How will today's war affect the future of Ukraine?
12. How are Ukrainians and Poles/the French/Finns different?
13. What interesting cities and places did you visit in Poland/France/Finland?
14. How is your day different in Ukraine and in the new place? What are the main difficulties you have to overcome?
15. Do you plan to return home?
16. What stories have you been told about other people?
17. What important things do you want to say that I didn't ask you?

This indicative list could be expanded with others, depending on the situation and the storyteller. I often tell my interlocutor my own story, because I want our conversation to be a mutual exchange of information, emotions, and reflections.

Today, my war archive contains about 130 interviews. The vast majority are conversations with women who were forced to leave Ukraine because of the war. I conducted about ten conversations with people involved in organising rallies in support of Ukraine in Paris and Helsinki. While already in Ukraine, I recorded two conversations with a couple from Kherson who survived the flooding of their city due to the explosion of the Kakhovka hydroelectric power station.

Conclusions

The main reason for recording interviews about war experiences in Ukraine was the desire to record the truth about this extremely important event first-hand. The majority of my collection of interviews during the active phase of the Russia–Ukraine war is conversations with Ukrainian refugees in Poland, France and Finland. These are mainly victim interviews in which the main focus is on the loss of the former way of life, the depreciation of the education obtained in the Motherland, and uncertainty about the future. An obligatory part of the story is the desire to explain why people left Ukraine.

The most important feature of my approach to recording interviews and their analysis is that they are conducted using the method of participant observation, when you have the opportunity to make contact with storytellers not only when recording conversations, but much more both before and after the interview when you obtain the necessary refugee documents. This also happens when visiting common locations for refugees and rallies in support of Ukraine, in which I participated in Paris, Helsinki and Tampere. Participant observation made it possible to make important conclusions about the

reasons for refusing interviews, favourite and taboo topics in the stories, and the influence of grand narratives on what the storytellers say. Being among refugees made it possible to see how different the situation of Ukrainians abroad is. For example, some live with a full family, while others live with an unhealed wound due to the loss of a close relative; some have a husband on the front line, others have relatives left behind in the occupied areas; some lost their homes, community of neighbours and jobs while others left a more or less peaceful place in search of a better life, taking advantage of the temporary protection opportunities for Ukrainians.

The stories we have through interviews are not only a chronicle of the war, but also a certain self-presentation by narrators that often determines the chronological and plot line of the story.

Today, researchers emphasise the importance of the early recordings made in the first two years of the wars, even half-jokingly using the term immediate ethnography to refer to these interviews. At the same time, in repeated recordings made in the third year of the war, most narrators emphasise that they have already forgotten what they were talking about and note that even today they would not remember half of it. It was the early interviews that were closest to the transfer of experience, in contrast to repeated recordings, which contain much more emotional analysis of what was experienced.

A typical reaction of storytellers to their own interview is to note that this conversation had a positive effect on their psychological self-organisation. People are grateful that they were listened to. They understood a lot for themselves and were pleased that their story was interesting to someone else. This, among other things, is the importance of our work.

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