



Extraordinary Lives of Ordinary People

An introduction to oral history

Picture: Brett Wide

Over the past eleven years I've recorded the life-stories of many people who've lived and worked in Moseley. They include Mohammed Ayyub, who attended a Scottish mission school in the Punjab, founded the Oriental Star Agency on the Moseley Road and became a well-known radio presenter and promoter of Asian music; Ellen O'Brien, who worked as a midwife in back to back houses during the war and in the Sorrento Hospital in the 1960s; the CBSO percussion player, Maggie Cotton; Renée Kingston, who described her parents' pre-war pawn-broking shop; a Big Issue seller who later got a good job, and a man who recalled growing cannabis in his youth!

I began making audio recordings of life-stories in 1998, when I was appointed as one of forty radio producers all over the UK to work on the BBC's Millennium oral history project, *The Century Speaks*. My task was to record the memories of at least one hundred people from the West Midlands and Warwickshire, in interviews lasting between ninety minutes and two hours, and to make sixteen half-hour programmes which were broadcast on BBC WM and BBC Coventry & Warwickshire in autumn 1999 and repeated in autumn 2000. My interviews were deposited – with interviews from all over the UK – in the British Library Sound Archive and I made copies of those that related to Birmingham for the Central Library. My programmes won the Commission for Racial Equality's Race in the Media Award; parts of them were repeated on Radio 4 and my whole series was sold on cassette for several years afterwards.

This experience changed the course of my working life. While my children were young, I had greatly enjoyed working as a part-time freelance reporter for the Radio 4 programme, *Woman's Hour*, and other magazine programmes on national radio and the World Service. I had recorded some fascinating stories, but none as gripping as the memories of the people I recorded for *The Century Speaks*. When I reflected on why these oral history interviews were so compelling, I realised that it was because I'd been able to spend hours listening to my interviewees with no immediate deadline and, more importantly, I'd been encouraged to let them talk about whatever mattered most to them instead of whatever fitted into my journalistic agenda.

Going it alone

Exactly 10 years ago, I decided to try to make a living as a freelance oral history interviewer and producer and I immediately got a contract to collect 150 life-stories for Birmingham City Council's

Millennibrum project- now available in the Archives and Heritage section of the Central Library. Extracts from my Birmingham interviews can be heard on my website (www.oralhistoryconsultancy.co.uk); on the Digital Handsworth website (www.digitalhandsworth.org.uk, Search *Helen Lloyd Gallery*) and on the tour of the National Trust Back to Backs in Hurst Street - and last year I made a CD, *Memories of Back to Backs*, which is now on sale at the site.

I've also undertaken many oral history projects outside Birmingham, including filmed interviews with Jewish refugees for the Jewish Museum in Camden and an oral history of diabetes for Oxford University (www.diabetes-stories.com). This year I've recorded memories of the Wolverhampton Grand Theatre (www.grandmemories.co.uk) and I'm currently editing audio for the London Canal Museum. I lecture on oral history all over the UK and abroad as well as training people of all ages, from school-children to retired people, to undertake oral history projects for themselves. This month, I begin training volunteers to record the memories of people who have commoning rights in the New Forest.

Digital Technology

When I embarked on this change of career I feared that interest in oral history might fade after the Millennium, but instead the number of oral history projects has greatly increased. This may be partly due to nostalgia in a time of rapid change, but I think it's largely due to the spread of digital technology. When oral history recordings were made on reel-to-reel tapes or cassettes, they tended to grow dusty on library shelves, because it was hard to locate particular sections of long interviews. Now, recordings can be made available through a variety of digital media and, provided that each interview is summarised, people can easily locate the sections that interest them.

The past is surely worth recording for its own sake, but if contemporary relevance is sought, then it's easily found in accounts of how to 'make do and mend', in interviews with Jewish asylum seekers from the 1930s whose relatives were refused entry to the UK, and in accounts by innocent Irish people of how they were regarded as terrorists after the Birmingham bombings of 1974. I feel very privileged to have listened to these stories.

Helen Lloyd

info@oralhistoryconsultancy.co.uk