In Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother's house

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Questions like the one ICME poses: *Education and Oral History. What contribution can oral history make in the production of educational programmes designed to develop links, active learning and networking?* are indicative of the way many, if not all, museums are starting to shift their focus away from objects and are beginning to focus on visitors.

Such questions are particularly gratifying for people working in museums and those whose work is museum related, who feel their work is deserving of a scientific, museological foundation.

With forebears like Homer and Herodotus we could not possibly fail to be a race of story-tellers – a race that soon realized how the written word could save those precious verbal accounts that are not "yarns" but "tales".

In the invocation by Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses, in the Orphic hymn "Mnemosyne, Frankincense", memory is described as *liquid*, *always alert*, *recalling everything*, as *a staunch power that augments the human mind* and as averting the *forgetfulness* that is *harmful to the mind*.

In the latter half of the 20th century universities and other organizations adopted what was a fairly obvious course of action: committing memory to writing by making

written records of people's accounts of their lives, especially after the advent of the tape recorder in the 1940's and video recording.

Oral History became a scientific discipline and was defined as a method for gathering and preserving historical information about events or ways of life in the past on tape or video recordings of interviews. It is also described as the oldest and yet most modern form of historical research. (Oral History Association.) Attention is drawn to the contribution that unedited or recorded personal accounts make to historical research. (Canadian Oral History Association.) And special stress is laid on the fact that oral history allows the voices of those who were hidden from history in the past (the poor, women, religious, political and cultural minorities) to be heard. These people can help enrich knowledge in a variety of areas (childhood, schooldays, welfare, working life etc.). This ensures that the structure of history in the future will be more reliable. (Oral History Society.)

"Memory is our coherence, our logic, our action, our emotion. Without memory we are nothing," Luis Bunuel claims. He also believes that even the assaults that *imagination* and *pipe dreams* make on our memory, assaults which frequently turn a lie into a truth, have a certain significance since they are experiences that have become incorporated in memory (1984, 11-12). Even so, Oral History monitors, analyses, verifies and evaluates accounts within the general historical context, as it knows full well that when memories are unfolding, tender feelings play a stronger role than ideas.

Oral History has its own ways and means of controlling the subjectivity of the personal account, and also the factors that together determine how the past and the present are understood.[1]

In this way Oral History not only breathes life into those whom history has labelled as "immortal", but also breathes life into those who would otherwise be in a state of oblivion. Oral History builds a bridge across the three dimensions of time. The narrator's past lives in the listener's present and future, and in the present and future of the listener's descendents.

[1] Factors which are liquid and change from one age to another. The reading of ancient authors in modern times is a case in point. See. Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath, *Who killed Homer?* Cactus, Athens

As well as these long-term perspectives, Oral History also presents more immediate targets for museums (and schools).

Oral History can:

- Investigate local history and make it better understood.
- Establish links between younger and older generations.[2]
- Heighten the sense of personal contribution to the life of the community.
- Testify to and promote the continuation of the community.
- Put information given in exhibitions to good use.

In this presentation the scope of the subject as expressed by ICME (*Education and Oral History. What contribution can oral history make in the production of educational programmes designed to develop links, active learning and networking?*) is restricted to: *How a museum's use of Oral History can contribute to the development of educational programmes* - a restriction imposed by my working environment which also determines and fuels my professional concerns and the direction of my research.

The Coumantaros Art Gallery Sparta, Branch of the National Gallery of Greece, makes Oral History part of its educational programmes whenever the aim and circumstances permit (all those taking part have formed positive opinions). I shall mention a few cases in point:

- Two of the thirteen educational programmes in the project, *Sparta: From Ancient Myth to Present Times*, for junior and senior high schools, were based on oral history:

1999. " A *Le Point* magazine special section on the Greek Philosophers. Myths and Fairy-tales of the Ancient Greeks", newspaper. *Eleftherotypia*, 08/08/2005.

[2] "The world of the old, of all the old, is, for some more and others less, the world of memories. They say that ultimately you are what you think, what you love, what you achieve. I would add: you are what you remember," (Bobbio, 51). And this memory helps the elderly person to survive. And if he could communicate it to others, it would help even more, especially today when the speed of scientific and technological progress makes him obsolete because he lacks the mobility to keep up with it.

a. *Disappearing Occupations*. The children gathered information about disappearing trades from interviews and personal accounts. They took photographs, collected tools, searched through literary texts for relevant descriptions, and used the material they collected to set up an exhibition at their school. (Sparta T.E.L.).

b. *The cycle revolves*: The children studied the institution of the family in Greece as seen in folklore (birth, childhood, play, love, marriage, emigration, death and then new life in the form of another birth). They recorded lullabies, songs, myths, narratives, fairy tales and laments. They used dance, song and role-play to present *The Cycle Revolves,* i.e. the cycle of life, as the old folk of the village had described it to them. (Junior and Senior High Schools of Xirokambi).[3]

- In photographer Georgios Tzannakos' exhibition entitled *Years of Sweet Expectation on a Grey Background. Contrast in the Memories of Photographer Georgios Tzannakos*, Oral History provided information when the visitors themselves corrected or augmented the exhibition texts. For example: an explanatory label beside a photograph in the exhibition read, "From the royal family's visit to Mystras, 24/4/1955".

  The label was corrected when Vasilis Georgoulis, a visitor to the exhibition, noted, "I was a schoolboy when the royal family came to Laconia. Our teacher had told us to wear our best clothes. He lined us up along one side of the road, near the Vasilakeio inns. In those days we used to call them the Tarapsa inns. It was April. Georgios Tzannakos the photographer – I still remember him 'cause I was most impressed by how he never seemed to care. When a policeman was saluting the king, military style, a little girl gave the king a bunch of flowers. This Tzannakos, instead of taking a photograph of the soldier, took a photograph of the little girl. So the policeman really gave him a piece of his mind."

  It the photograph in question was not actually taken at Mystras at all, but at the Vasilakeio Inns. And the oral account provides information about the photographer who was born in 1929 and died in 1959, aged thirty. Little is known

[3] Georgia Kakourou-Chroni, *Mouseio Scholeio. Portes antikristes sti gnosi*, Patakis, Athens 2005.

about the life of this photographer, and even less about his personality and character.

This oral account meant the could perceive certain personality traits and attribute them to the photographer. The children responded by formulating a picture of an artist who selected his subject matter according to aesthetic criteria, a person of free will who did not give a second thought to what effect his choices might have, and this at a time when political propriety restricted freedom of choice.

- For the programme "Watercolour Town" [4] the children studied the buildings of Sparta, as well as other things. When they were studying the Museum of the Olive and Greek Olive Oil, which had not yet been opened to the public, their source of information was accounts given to them by members of the Papadolias family. This museum is housed in the Papadolias family's old electricity production plant, suitably converted. A lot of the children said they thought the Museum of the Olive and Greek Olive Oil should have been housed in one of the area's old olive press workshops where even the walls would 'tell a tale of oil".
- An educational programme was conducted during the exhibition of photographs by members of Sparta Photograph Club entitled *On all Matters.* One of the activities in the programme was that junior high school children should "enter" one of the subjects photographed (old buildings, churches, beaches, ancient monuments) and talk to the people there, play with the animals and birds, listen to the waves breaking on the shore and the sighing of the wind.

Their accounts, the stories they told were published in the Paratiritis tis Laconias newspaper. Two of the thirteen stories published are given here as a sample of their work:

a. Erato Kakourou, *Relaxing on a Greek Island*: No homework, no school, no "make your bed" or "tidy your desk". Mum and Dad are relaxed and don't keep nagging me to do my homework. I am enjoying this. Going for walks up and down the cobbled streets. Little white houses with red geraniums in blue tins.

Blue sky and blue sea. Beautiful sunsets. As for sunrises, I did say, 'Relaxing on a Greek Island." That means I probably won't see any of those.
b. Dimitris Bratis, *On Mount Taygetos*: Standing in front of the photograph of Mount Taygetos I remembered what my grandmother says, 'This is Mount Taygetos" and she points at me. Yes. I am Mount Taygetos, the high mountain with my countless peaks, my woods, my cliffs and springs. In winter I am joy for children who come to play in the snow, and in summer I offer cooling breezes to passing wayfarers. Look after me, my friends. I am threatened by fire. I give life with my oxygen, the water from my springs and so many other things. Hey, people, look at me, Mount Taygetos, I am a gift from nature to you. We are here on this planet to be together and to give meaning to the word 'life' ". [5]

The above activities helped further exploration of three thought-provoking issues:

- What kind of response does the use of Oral History trigger in children?
- What use do they make of the information they gather?
- How can they themselves make the transition from the role of audience to that of narrator?

As far as the first issue is concerned, the children themselves thought their response had been positive. They attributed this primarily to the insight they had acquired, but also to the joy of talking to people they would otherwise never have approached (folk musicians, tinkers, cobblers, umbrella makers, chair seat weavers, shoe-shiners, chestnut roasters and so on) and also talking to people living almost next door to them (residents of Xirokambi, a small village in Laconia). During *The Cycle Revolves,* these people revealed their knowledge, wisdom and humour, which the children had previously been totally unaware of, in their own way as they narrated their stories.

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[4] Georgia Kakourou-Chroni, "Ydarografimeni poli", journal . *Archaiologia kai Technes*, issue 81, December 2001, pp. 117-119.
[5] The children's article was published in the *Paratiritis tis Laconias* newspaper, 10-8-2002, p. 3.

As for using the information, the children enriched their stock of world knowledge, characterised, and assessed political and cultural decisions.

In the role of narrator they discovered the joy of finding "ears" to listen to your narrative with interest.

Museological and museum educational stimuli in the programme "In Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother's house" provided food for thought in similar areas of investigation within the general context of museological and museum educational issues.

The power of objects to bring images of the past into the present is an inherent characteristic (Pearce, 1995). Even so, the image that the object transports from the past "fades" when the object ceases to be useful, functional or ornamental and becomes a museum object. When it is an exhibit, an object is removed from the surroundings in which it was originally used; it is taken out of context and so the messages it conveys are less distinct.

If we were able to return the object to its natural surroundings, we would relieve it of a lot of the factors that disguise its significance and cloak its meaning:

- Away from the display case, in its true functional surroundings, an object's identity is so much clearer.
- The negative effect of time on decoding the significance of the object is greatly reduced.
- Labels that manifest the scientific principles determining the museum's philosophy or the curator's ideology and aspirations are avoided.

In other words, place, time and interpretation – three key factors in the significance of an object – are brought under control, thereby making a more authentic approach possible.

The object's natural environment may not be the place where it was made; in other words, it might be removed from the workshop and the creator (craftsman or artist) that fashioned it, but the time and place that the object belongs to is more in tune with the

time and place of the observer when no museological interpretive predilections come between the object and its observer.

An authentic reading might be a Utopian dream. The observer is the product of the linguistic, political, social and cultural system that nurtured him (Foucault) and our whole civilisation is a semiotic phenomenon (Eco). During the diffusion of the reading process the "object" cannot possibly be separated from the things that make it what it is.

But when they are out of the display case (In Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother's house) objects are less stilted in the way they communicate. They become more familiar and tell their tales with greater ease.[6]

The tale would be enhanced if, where possible, the actual "grandfather" and "grandmother" related it in their own natural idiom. It would at least be free from information overload as the direction of live interaction like this (the interpretive approach) is usually determined by questions the observer asks.

The visit to "great-grandfather and great-grandmother's house" took place in June 2005 with a group of ten American students from Carnegie Mellon University. It was part of the inter-departmental programme "Sparta, Greece: Inquiry and Vision" which was conducted in collaboration with the Art Gallery for the second year running.

The aim of the students' two-week sojourn in Laconia was to bring them into direct contact with the countryside and culture. Each student focused on a different area of interest; anthropology, sociology, history, music, architecture, sculpture, writing (plays, poetry, prose), decorative arts, folk art and so on.

The idea behind the visit to the Linardakis home in Vordonia Laconia, about twenty kilometres from Sparta, was to acquaint the students with aspects of contemporary Greek culture.

[6] Many contemporary exhibitions seem to want to reproduce this atmosphere. I mention two recent ones, one in Greece and one abroad. Finds from the deep cave of Andritsas (Argolis) are on display in the Byzantine and Christian Museum (Doukisas Plakentias building) as if in a cave, with the help of technology and special constructions. Visitors to the exhibition of mysteries and ceremonies of the ancient Greek and Roman world at the Colosseum are surrounded by midnight silence so that enigmatic sounds can be heard.

Prior to the visit four interviews had been given on the history of the house and the family.[7] All four interviewees were men, and all four gave accounts of things men had done. But the story told by objects in the house springs from choices probably made by women.[8]

Nevertheless, the objects themselves bear the marks of the individual lives of the people who used them. The objects were quite revealing and those that were not willing to reveal much allowed Stephanos[9] to do so in interviews he gave. During the visit:

- The impressive nature of the house served to indicate the family's financial and social standing.
- The usefulness of the objects and their function were plain to see.
- Surprise prompted questions and the search for answers, which it also supplied. Even when the objects were "closed" (Nakos, 2001) and left no room for the luxury of wandering through various possible readings, they won admiration by virtue of their very authenticity.
- A lot of the students realised that the purpose of the object determined the choice of material used in its manufacture as well as its shape.
- The choice of object was related to its users' financial and social status.
- The history of an object is easier to see when the object is in its place of normal use.
- The passage of time frequently overrides an object's functional value and makes it into an ornamental object with a new, different value (it becomes a collector's item or a museum piece).
- Objects reveal:
    - Their owner's mindset and aspirations.
    - Their owner's interests and occupations.
    - Their owner's ideology and political convictions.

[7] Dinos Linardakis, Elias Linardakis, Stratis Polyzogopoulos and Stefanos Linardakis, all gave interviews and I would like to use this opportunity to thank them most kindly.
[8] Men and women's collecting habits are particularly interesting. See "Women and Men" in: Susan M. Pearce, *Collecting in Contemporary Practice*, Altamira Press, London, 1998, pp.125-151.

- Particular features of men, women and children.

- The visit to the house brought all five senses into play:
  - Nature itself was a benevolent accomplice and made everything a joy to behold.
  - Nature and the objects each exuded their own scents.
  - Sounds heard were different from those normally heard in a museum.
  - There were no display cases to impede the sense of touch. Patricia took off her shoes so she could feel the different textures of the floors (wood, ceramic tiles) and the rugs spread over them (kilims, rag rugs, long-haired flocati rugs, animal skins).
  - The sense of taste also contributed to the pleasure with olive-oil bread, cheese made by the local shepherd, flat pies made with wild greens and olives. Plain village fare.
- The multiplicity of each object's significance was evidenced in the ease with which each student moved from material qualities to the symbolic implications that reflected his or her own interests.
- The complexity of the interpretative approach became clear when the students realised that their various approaches were in keeping with their own time and their own place.

A short search through files at the General National Archives of the Prefecture of Laconia bore out what was said in the interviews. The only recorded documents relevant to the Municipal district of Pellana, where Vordonia is, were the registers of Kastania Primary School (Kastania is now called Kastori). According to these school registers fourteen boy pupils whose surname was Linardakis attended the school between 1901 and 1940, and five girl pupils with the same surname attended the school after 1926 when it became a mixed school.

Under the column headed "father's occupation" are the words, labourer, land-owner or farmer, bearing out that the income of this Laconia based family derived from

[9] Brother and sister, Maria and Stephanos Linardakis, are the present owners of the house.

the ownership of land. When the family eventually became able to give the children a university education, cultivation of the land gradually died out and farming was abandoned as the family's livelihood. The family income now came from business activities in Kalamata (a soap factory, an olive stone fuel plant, an ice factory). The members of the family that settled in Kalamata soon adapted to urban pursuits and rose through the ranks to become part of the city's "elite" society. [10]

Viewed from the educational perspective, a few conclusions of a general nature can be drawn from "In Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother's house".

- This short investigation led to conclusions that do not surprise, but are significant in that they confirm previous assumptions.
- The relationship between the children and the narrator evolved into a tender one that was friendlier and on a more familiar basis than a relationship between museum visitors and personnel could be.
- The objects gave the children the chance to hear stories that they would not have heard at school or in a museum. They heard tales about ordinary people, their neighbours; tales that reflected their own ordinary experiences.
- Relations between the Art Gallery and the public (the five hundred residents of the village of Vordonia on the slopes of Mount Taygetos where "great-grandfather and great-grandmother's house", the Linardakis family home, is to be found) remained much as they had been before, but the people of Vordonia were made aware of the fact that the Gallery exists. They learnt something about its aims and the way it operates and said they would like to come and see it.
- The "reminiscence boxes" that are to be found in some museums (for instance Leeds Museums and Galleries' "Sewing and Mending") could be made "live". Direct personal contact guarantees a much more vivid picture of the past.
- The programme was a meeting point for two different generations; the generation that the children represented and that of the residents of the village.

[10] Pepi Gavalla (2002, 292) has concluded that rising through the ranks of society was common in the late 19th and early 20th century.

- Oral History also proved a good method to use in an intercultural approach, in promoting understanding between local people and visitors. This aspect is of great interest because Oral History constitutes a point of contact for members of a multicultural society – which is what Greek society is fast becoming.

In view of students' and teachers' positive evaluations of the programme, it will be re-run in the spring of 2006 for children from junior high schools and senior high schools.

The visit children in the last two years of primary school will pay to an early 20th century house in Sparta[11] is also part of the Art Gallery's plan to reach out beyond the physical walls that surround it. The aim of this programme, entitled 'The Time Machine", is that the children's visit to this house should also take in the Art Gallery itself, which is housed in a similar building, now converted for use as a museum.

[11] The house belongs to Dimitris and Yvonne Papadolias, who, in the role of grandfather and grandmother will welcome the children to their home. I thank them whole-heartedly for rising to the occasion so willingly.

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