



# Parliamentary Oral History

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# For introduction

- ◆ Extract from an interview with Mr. Gerhart Bruckmann
- ◆ MP (Austrian People's Party) 1986-1994, 1999-2002





# Outline

- ◆ What is Oral History?
  - ◆ Oral History Methodology
  - ◆ Parliamentary Oral History
  - ◆ Parliamentary Oral History in Austria
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# What is Oral History?

- ♦ „Simply put, oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews.” (Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Oxford 2015, p. 1)
  - ♦ Collecting information orally is not a new approach for historians (e.g., Herodotos, Thukydides)
  - ♦ Allan Nevins’ founding of Columbia Oral History Research Office in 1948 often seen as starting point for modern Oral History
  - ♦ As a methodologically consistent approach, “Oral History” has become a broad, worldwide movement in the past 50 years
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# The Oral History movement

- ♦ Main reason: lack of written sources
  - ♦ Main driver: availability of recording tools (analog to digital)
  - ♦ Early users: ethnologists, anthropologists, sociologists
  - ♦ Historians have systematically used Oral History since 1960s
  - ♦ Main areas of application: social history („history from below“, „people’s history“, „grassroots history“), history of totalitarian, dictatorial, or colonial systems
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# Methodology

- ◆ Main formal approaches
    - ◆ Free narrative
    - ◆ Guided narrative
    - ◆ Interview with open questions
  - ◆ Main substantial approaches
    - ◆ Life reviews
    - ◆ Specific subjects, events, or periods of life
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# Methodology

- ♦ Main focuses
    - ♦ Personal experiences and memories: „factual“ information
    - ♦ Personal attitudes, values, motivations, and opinions
  - ♦ „As a methodological approach, oral (hi)story interviews seek to access the socially constructed reflective thoughts about an individual’s life.” (Tina Patel, The Usefulness of Oral Life (Hi)story to Understand and Empower: The Case of Trans-Racial Adoption, Qualitative Social Work 4, 2005, p. 338)
  - ♦ Not only “what?” but also “why?”
  - ♦ Even factual errors provide evidence: “We would know much less about the meaning of all this history if we didn’t have these precious, creative errors of memory.” (Alessandro Portelli, Biography of an Industrial Town, Cham 2014, p. 13)
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# Methodology

- ♦ Ethical basis: „informed consent“
  - ♦ Legal basis: legal release/copyright declaration/agreement
  - ♦ Technical basis: A/V recording equipment
  - ♦ Many reference works, e.g.
    - ♦ Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 2nd ed., London 2016
    - ♦ Thomas L. Charlton et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Oral History*, Lanham, MD, 2006
    - ♦ Patricia Leavy, *Oral History*, Oxford 2011
    - ♦ Robert Perks & Alistair Thomson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd ed., London 2016
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# Procedure

- ◆ Conceptualisation and research design
  - ◆ Preparation (incl. question guide for interviews)
  - ◆ Conducting talks/interviews
  - ◆ Transcribing talks/interviews
  - ◆ Evaluation/presentation/publication
  - ◆ Archiving collected material
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# Parliamentary Oral History

- ♦ UK: early written questionnaire approach by Josiah Wedgwood in the 1930s, addressing MPs from 1885 to 1918
  - ♦ History of Parliament Trust (in association with British Library) started Oral History project in 2011: „life story“ interviews with so far around 200 former MPs
  - ♦ Emma Peplow & Priscila Pivatto (eds.), *The Political Lives of Postwar British MPs: An Oral History of Parliament*, London 2020 (pb. edition 2022)
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# Parliamentary Oral History

„The interviewees are not before a judge and jury but given a platform that, as the authors say, ‘allows us to hear how these politicians view their own careers through, in some cases, deep personal reflection’.”

Gordon Marsden, MP, Foreword, in Peplow & Pivatto (eds.), *op.cit.*, p. vii

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# Parliamentary Oral History examples

- ♦ The Scottish Parliament Oral History Project:
    - ♦ Around 80 interviews to date, online access via SoundCloud
    - ♦ Thomas A.W. Stewart (ed.), *The Scottish Parliament in its Own Words: An Oral History*, Edinburgh 2019
  - ♦ National Library of Australia and Museum of Australian Democracy: Old Parliament House political and parliamentary oral history project
    - ♦ More than 100 interviews to date, online access via National Library of Australia
  - ♦ Janet Mary Candon McCallum, *Women in Parliament* oral history project (1991-1992)
    - ♦ 12 interviews, online access via National Library of New Zealand
    - ♦ Janet Mary Candon McCallum, *Women in the House: Members of Parliament in New Zealand*, Picton, NZ, 1993
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# Parliamentary Oral History in Austria

- ♦ Objective: researching development of parliamentary practice, infrastructure, and self-perception, and role of Parliament in political system and civil society since the 1960s
  - ♦ Approach: interviews with open questions in accordance with pre-defined question guide (in flexible order, and with focal points adapted to respective biography)
  - ♦ Interview partners: primarily former MPs, additionally former staff members of parliamentary groups and Parliamentary Administration
  - ♦ Technical solution: video (mp4, first Full HD, now 4K Ultra HD)
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# Question guides

Around 20 questions (thematic areas)

Three different guides for former MPs,  
and staff members of parliamentary  
groups and Parliamentary Administration,  
resp.

Grundzüge eines allgemeinen Gesprächsleitfadens für Interviews mit  
ehemaligen Mitarbeitern der gesetzgebenden Körperschaften

- Persönlicher Ausbildungshintergrund
  - Berufliche Vortätigkeiten
  - Politische Sozialisation
  - Politische Funktionen
  - Nominierung für parlamentarisches Mandat und Wahlbewegung
  - Vorbereitung auf Ausübung des parlamentarischen Mandats
  - Parlamentarische Funktionen
  - Inhaltliche Schwerpunkte in der parlamentarischen Tätigkeit
  - Kooperationsmuster innerhalb des Parlamentsklubs
  - Kooperationsmuster mit Abgeordneten anderer Parlamentsklubs
  - Kooperationsmuster zwischen den gesetzgebenden Körperschaften
  - Kooperationsmuster mit anderen Akteuren des politischen Systems
  - Räumliche Infrastruktur
  - Technische Infrastruktur
  - Interaktion mit Organen der Parlamentsverwaltung
  - Prägende Persönlichkeiten
  - Wahrnehmung der Rolle des Parlaments im politischen System
  - Einschätzung der Wahrnehmung des Parlaments in der Öffentlichkeit
  - Einschätzung der Rolle der Mitglieder gesetzgebender Körperschaften im politischen System
  - Anekdotische Erinnerungen
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# Declaration of consent

Material may be reproduced, distributed, publicly performed, broadcasted, placed online, made available to the public, used for research and pedagogical purposes, and archived

Rights may be transferred to a third party

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## EINVERSTÄNDNISERKLÄRUNG

Vielen Dank für das Interview im Rahmen des Projekts zur Erforschung der Entwicklung des Parlamentarismus und der Parlamentsverwaltung in der Zweiten Republik.

Mit der vorliegenden Einverständniserklärung erlauben Sie der Parlamentsdirektion, das Interview sowie die von Ihnen zur Verfügung gestellten gescannten bzw. gefilmten Fotos, Dokumente etc. für wissenschaftliche, volksbildnerische und pädagogisch-didaktische Zwecke zu archivieren und zu verwenden.

Um das mit Ihnen hergestellte Interview sowie die von Ihnen zur Verfügung gestellten Materialien präsentieren und verwenden zu können, erteilen Sie der Parlamentsdirektion die auf Dritte übertragbare Bewilligung, das Interview zeitlich unbefristet in audiovisueller Form, als Tondokument und in verschriftlichter Form im Ganzen und in Teilen zu vervielfältigen, zu verbreiten, öffentlich aufzuführen, zu senden, online zu stellen und der Öffentlichkeit zur Verfügung zu stellen.

Für alle der Parlamentsdirektion eingeräumten Rechte entsteht seitens des/der Interviewten kein Entgeltanspruch.



# Project phases

- ◆ First phase (2015-2018)
    - ◆ 57 interviews (97 h)
    - ◆ Focus on age and position
    - ◆ Presentation of results: print publication and media station in Parliamentary Library
  - ◆ Second phase
    - ◆ Impeded by COVID-19 pandemic
    - ◆ 29 interviews to date (54 h)
  - ◆ Altogether so far 86 interviews (151 h)
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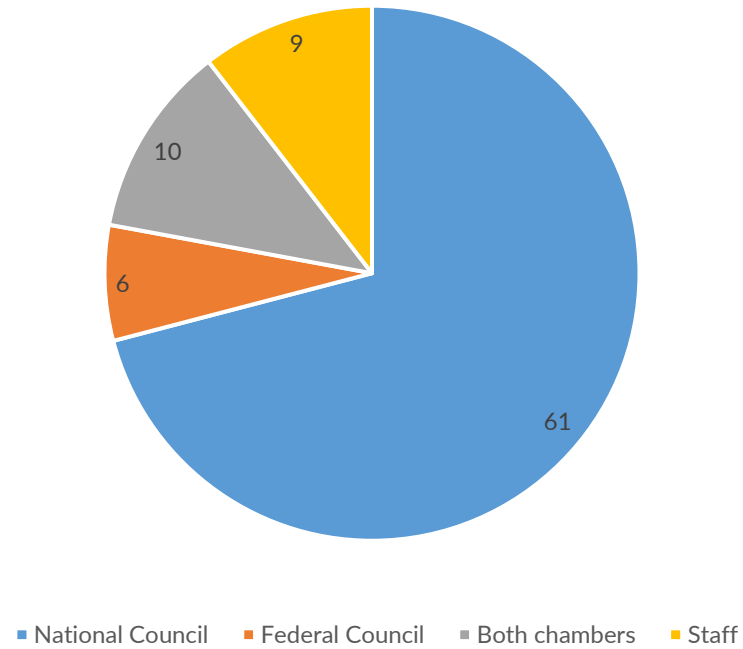


# Striking the balance

- ◆ Most important (in particular in parliamentary environment): striking the right balance, as to
    - ◆ Parliamentary chambers (in Austria: National Council vs. Federal Council)
    - ◆ Parliamentary groups/parties
    - ◆ Regional background (in Austria: 9 federal provinces)
    - ◆ Gender
  - ◆ Aiming at representativity, with some over-representation of minor groups
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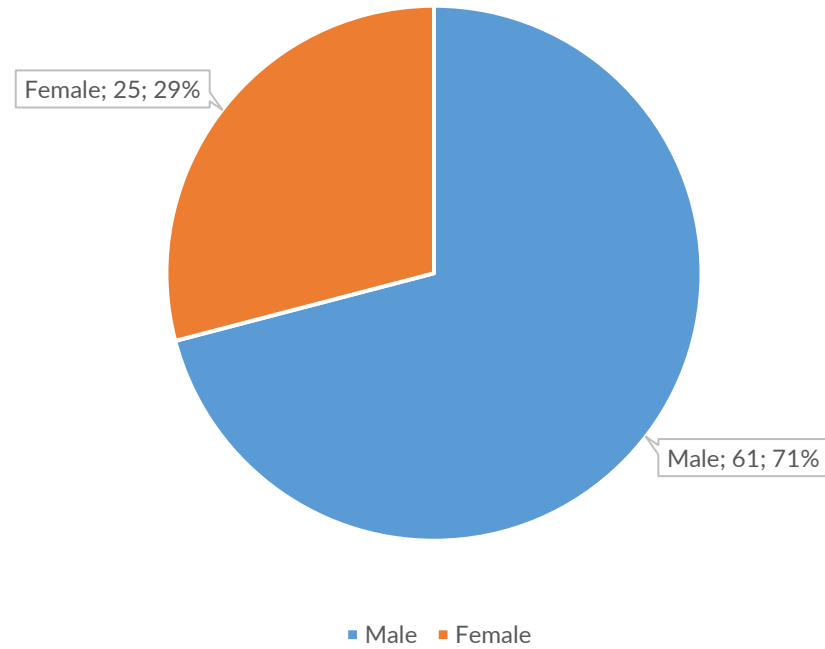


# Positional background



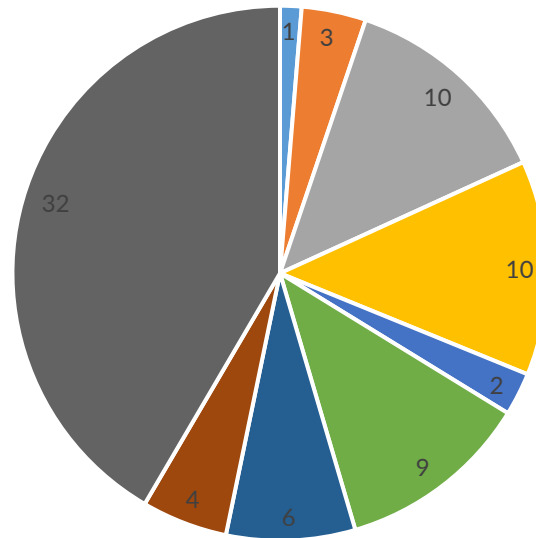


# Gender





# Regional background of MPs

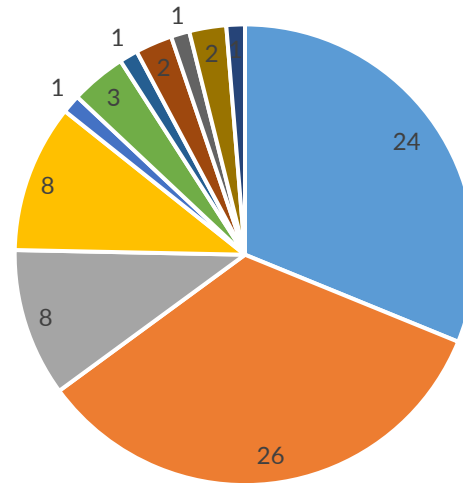


■ Burgenland ■ Carinthia ■ Lower Austria ■ Upper Austria ■ Salzburg ■ Styria ■ Tyrol ■ Vorarlberg ■ Vienna

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# Parliamentary group/party affiliation of MPs



- SPÖ (Social Democratic Party)
- ÖVP (People's Party)
- FPÖ (Freedom Party)
- Greens
- NEOS
- FPÖ/LIF (Liberal Forum)
- Greens/LIF
- FPÖ/BZÖ
- FPÖ/BZÖ/Stronach
- Greens/Pilz/JETZT
- Pilz/JETZT



# Transcription

- ♦ „Transcribing is a work of art, close to translation, but with less leeway.“ (Willa K. Baum, *Transcribing and Editing Oral History*, Nashville, TN, 1977, p. 6)
  - ♦ Basic decision: „narrow“ vs. „broad“ transcription (similar to transcription of plenary speeches)
  - ♦ Trying to keep to oral wording as far as possible, just making it readable but still recognizable as oral speech
  - ♦ A few interview partners demanded to check (and authorize) transcripts – in most cases, they made only minor amendments/deletions
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# Exploitation of results

- ◆ Print publication on results of first phase: structured overview of development of the Austrian Parliament since the 1960s
  - ◆ Planned: print editions of single interviews
  - ◆ Media station within parliamentary exhibition space to present extracts of interviews
  - ◆ Material for historical research
  - ◆ Planned: long-term archiving in Austrian Media Library
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# Print publication







# Media station

ORAL HISTORY  
Die Stimme im Plenum | Voices in the Plenary

9.11 9.12

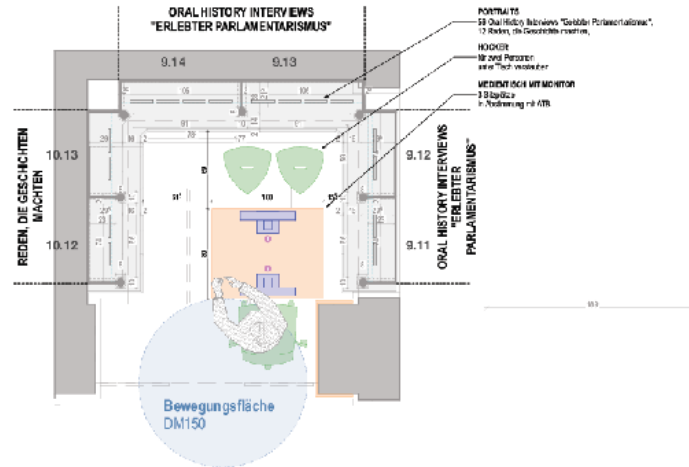


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Projekt: Parlamentarisches Institut und Archiv  
Medien: Copyright, Nutzung: Nichtkommerziell

Projekt: Gestaltung, Layout, Entwicklung und  
Einführung der Medienstation

Titel: Medienstation  
Projekt: Medienstation  
Datei: Medienstation  
Datei: Medienstation  
Datei: Medienstation



# Media station





# Media station





# For conclusion

- ◆ Extract from an interview with Ms. Freda Meissner-Blau
- ◆ MP (Greens) 1986-1988





**Thank you for your attention!**

Further information:

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