



## **After the silence, the time of Ukrainian memory**

Thursday 13 July 2023, by [After Silence](#), [LE TRÉHONDAT Patrick](#) (Date first published: 12 July 2023).

**Officially ignored stories are kept silent: in family silences, more often than not, they are traumatic experiences linked to the past, in particular to the era of Soviet and National Socialist violence, but also to the Ukrainian present. “It is time to reveal what is hidden, to explore the taboo, to listen to those who have been silenced. It is the time of the After Silence” explains the association After Silence [Après le silence] which answers our questions.**



**After Silence was founded in 2021. Can you tell us how and why this association was created?**

Before creating our association, my colleagues and I had experience in the museum sector. This experience has shown us that working in a bureaucratic official institution can hinder the implementation of ideas that we consider valid. That’s why we created an informal initiative to implement our creative ideas. We work on oral history and this field is very fragile. But perhaps it is our work on personal histories and archives that sets us apart from other institutions. We seem to be in the last wagon, as the people who tell us their stories won’t be around in a few years. We want to record their stories for future generations. Furthermore, while public archives are open to everyone, not everyone is allowed to cross their threshold, and not everyone trusts official archives.

It is also important to us that our projects are not influenced or censored in the way we tell the

stories. We are interested in local initiatives – not just local historians, but also communities that create museums or memorials. Very little is known about them and often these communities do not have the tools available in large cities. However, we don't try to teach them how to do things right. And also, we want to learn from them and strengthen their initiatives as much as possible.



### **Why the name After Silence?**

We were looking for a simple and clear name that would evoke at the same time the themes on which we work: oral history, family history, silent and unofficial history. Often people tell us for the first time what they have experienced. That is to say, they did not even speak about it to their children or grandchildren: either they were afraid of traumatizing them, or their loved ones were not interested in what they had lived.

**You collect a lot of written and oral testimonies, photos. You do a lot of scanning work. In 2021, for example, you scanned 300 photos. Can you tell us more about your way of working? What about today, after the start of the full-scale war?**

We meet people who remember tragic events in the history of Ukraine in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to record interviews with them and digitize their family archives. We currently have 134 oral history interviews and over 6,000 photographs and digitized documents. These collections are constantly updated.

We organize small expeditions to different parts of Ukraine and we get a lot of help from local activists or parents who want us to record the memories of their grandparents and preserve them in this way. In 2023, we have already recorded interviews in Chernihiv , Volyn , Rivne, Ternopil, Ivano-Frankivsk, Zhytomyr and Vinnytsia regions, and we are planning expeditions to other regions in the near future. We try to record all interviews in a video format. After Russia's massive attacks on civilian infrastructure and power cuts, our work has been particularly difficult. But we managed to get the necessary devices and to work even without access to electricity. It was after the large-scale Russian invasion that we realized how fragile the memory of the past is. First of all, many of our interlocutors are going through a second war in their lives, which has a significant impact on their health. Second, many Ukrainian archives and museums were destroyed or looted, such as those in Chernihiv and Kherson. We don't know the extent of the loss of family records. People fleeing for their lives are often unable to take old photographs and documents with them. We believe it is now necessary to document and preserve as much as possible, and we just don't have time to wait.

We also search and buy photos and other documents about Ukrainian forced laborers in National Socialist Germany at online auctions. We have thus succeeded in collecting several hundred photos, letters and postcards. We try to identify their owners and research their history. To do this, we turn to Ukrainian and German archives or local activists, and we try to find those who may have known these people personally and who could share additional information. We have created an online

archive where we publish the results of our work. We don't know how these photos end up in online auctions. Sellers say nothing about it. Nevertheless, we manage to create new archives at a time when many archives are destroyed in Ukraine.



**As for the victims of Nazism in Ukraine, fewer of them are still alive. How do you document your work?**

Yes, we record interviews with people who survived National Socialist persecution. Among them are Holocaust survivors, former forced laborers and concentration camp prisoners. They are people of a very respectable age and there are fewer and fewer of them left. For example, we met and recorded the memoirs of a 100-year-old female prisoner of the Auschwitz concentration camp. If we find that these people need help, we contact them or their relatives through active voluntary initiatives.

It should also be noted that, in the Ukrainian context, the victims of National Socialist persecution are more numerous than is generally believed. These include, for example, children whose parents served in the Red Army, who were captured and died in captivity, or those who survived the burning of their villages and the massacres perpetrated during punitive operations. Abroad, virtually nothing is known about these tragedies.

Often a person and a family suffered both National Socialist and Soviet persecution. We recently met a woman whose parents saved Jews during the Holocaust and who was posthumously awarded the title of "Righteous Among the Nations" last year. If the Nazis had found out, they would have killed the Jews and anyone who helped them hide. The whole family also survived the Soviet repression: her father was sent to Gulag camps, her mother and children were deported to Siberia, and they were only allowed to return to Ukraine in 1960.

**You worked on the biggest Soviet deportation operation of the post-war period. At the time, around 78,000 people were forcibly deported from Western Ukraine to Siberia and Central Asia. Can you tell us more about this tragic event and the results of your work?**

World War II was not yet over and the Soviet regime began mass deportations from Ukrainian territory. More is known about the deportation of Crimean Tatars and other Crimean ethnic groups (Armenians, Greeks and others) in 1944. But at the same time, deportations began in western Ukraine. More than 210,000 people became victims between 1944 and 1953. Most of these people were held collectively responsible for the fact that a member of their family was allegedly associated with the Ukrainian nationalist movement. In many cases it was impossible to prove, but entire families were deported in freight cars to Siberia or the Far East on such charges, and their property confiscated. The largest such deportation action took place in October 1947 and almost 78,000 people were victims. Similarly, wealthy peasants, known as kulaks, Jehovah's Witnesses and other groups that the Soviet regime considered disloyal, were deported. Among them were people who had previously been persecuted by the National Socialists. Most of the deportees were women and children, including infants. They only began to be released after Stalin's death and this process took ten years, from 1954 to 1964. We are looking for people who survived these events. For example, one of our narrators said that she was born in a Ukrainian village in the territory of present-day Poland. During World War II, his parents were sent to forced labor in National Socialist Germany.

Upon their return, their families were expelled from their native village in western Ukraine, and a few years later they were deported from there to Siberia. To survive, our narrator started working at the age of 13.

**After the Silence also deal with Stalinist repression from the 1960s to the end of the 1980s?**

We are focusing more on documenting events that took place in the 1930s and 1950s. This is also because fewer and fewer people remember them. We have not specifically treated the events of the later period. Also in 2022, we made a series of recordings of stories of people who were forced to leave their homes and move to Lviv after the Russian invasion. This is the first stage of the project, which we plan to carry out over a long period.

**Do you present the work of After Silence abroad? Do you have relations with associations like yours in the post-Soviet region?**

We cooperate with a number of German organizations. In 2022, we contributed to the creation of two exhibitions: one in Germany on the history of Ukrainian Jews, including during the Holocaust, and the other in Poland on photographs of Ukrainian forced laborers. This year we are planning several other exhibition projects, notably in Germany, on the work and experiences of Ukrainian forced labourers. The vast majority of our public history projects are available in two languages: Ukrainian and English [see website address at end of article].

**What relationship do you establish between your work and the imperialist war in Ukraine, with all its crimes and all its horrors?**

Full-scale war affects everyone, including our storytellers. Even if they weren't directly affected, they always hear the air raid warnings, read the news about the deaths and the destruction, which reminds them of the past, because it is the second war that they know in their life. Their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren are now fighting, volunteering, working in critical infrastructure or have been forced to evacuate their homes. Most of our conversations, even before they were recorded, relate to current military events. We document the past war in the context of the current war, and this undoubtedly leaves traces on our understanding of what happened in the past.

**You state: "We work in the fields of memorial culture, public history and social anthropology to develop a critical understanding of Ukraine's past and present." What does a critical understanding of Ukraine's past and present mean to you?**

One of our main approaches is that the great history of Ukraine is made up of many individual stories. Each person's and family's experience is important to our understanding of the past because it allows us to see a particular event from different perspectives. The more we can document and preserve these individual histories, the better we can understand the past. For example, to understand what the Second World War was like in the Ukrainian context, it is not enough to have the point of view of the Red Army or the Ukrainian nationalists. We must consider both of these experiences, along with the many other stories of forced laborers, Jewish Holocaust survivors and those who helped them survive, those who voluntarily took refuge in the Soviet Union in 1941, and those who were forcibly deported to Siberia in 1944, those who collaborated with the National Socialist or Soviet regimes and those who fought against them. These experiences are numerous.

**How does your work contribute to the construction and defense of Ukrainian national identity?**

We are keen to share the materials we collect with local initiatives in Ukraine, such as museums or educational institutions that want to preserve and understand the history of their villages or towns. We create public history projects (documentaries, exhibitions, podcasts, media publications) to make our activities and the stories we have documented widely known.

After silence website (Ukrainian-English)

<https://www.google.fr/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKEwiE09yKmImAAxWtUaQEHb0WCFYQFnoECBIQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Faftersilence.co%2Fen%2F&usg=AOvVaw1S6Ar b8dBH8ZNVKySciW-p&opi= 89978449>

Facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/aftersilencengo>

A Ukrainian memorial comic of After silence: a three-year “Ostarbeiter”, the story of Maria Tymoshuk (in French and free to download)

[https://www.syllepse.net/syllepse\\_images/articles/bd-franc.pdf](https://www.syllepse.net/syllepse_images/articles/bd-franc.pdf)

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