Waiting for the Wind to Change

Oral Histories in the Post-Soviet Diaspora, Brighton Beach

By Yuri Fujita

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Fierce wind, mad wind, howling o'er the nations,
Knew'st thou how leapeth my heart as thou goest by:
Ah, thou wouldst pause awhile in a sudden patience
Like a human sigh.

Dinah Maria Mulock Craik

Acknowledgement

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Introduction

"Circumstances are unfolding. The wind will change," reiterated by one of the narrators of this project, a Belarusian man who arrived in New York in 2023. He describes his country's president, Alexander Lukashenko, as a weathervane, turning with the direction of Russia's political "wind." Believing that Belarusian politics will change for the better once Moscow shifts, he continues to pay rent on his apartment in his hometown. "I still have a place to go back to," he says, as he waits for the "wind" to change. "Wind" is a metaphor for politics—the system that shapes the world we stand on, moves the society we live in, and reaches far into individual lives, including those I met in Brighton Beach, the largest Russian-speaking enclave in the United States. Coincidentally, the "wind" he described was what I mostly followed as a journalist for more than a decade. I primarily reported on Japanese politics, seeking to document how decisions were made behind closed doors and how policies were intended to function. As I listened to my narrators' account in that interview, I noticed that I was finally tracing the other end—how political shifts translate into the quiet, complicated decisions people make.

I first visited Brighton Beach in late 2022, when I was still a journalist, hoping to understand how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was affecting the neighborhood's social dynamics. Reporting for a Japanese broadcaster, I produced a five-minute segment on how the neighborhood had changed since the invasion. I focused on Ukrainian refugees and the local networks supporting them, capturing what the assignment required. Yet even as I met the deadline, I sensed how much remained outside the frame. One moment stayed with me. I gathered reactions to the newly named "Ukrainian Way," which was meant to show solidarity with people affected by the war.[1] I stopped residents at random. "I think it's cool because I'm

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[1] "Ukrainian Way" is an additional name assigned to the intersection of Brighton Beach Avenue and Coney Island Avenue in August 2022. See, Hannah Kliger, "Brighton Beach Corner Co-Named 'Ukrainian Way' in Solidarity." *CBS New York*, August 24, 2022.

from Ukraine. That's a way to honor what's going on," one said. Another disagreed: "It's not just Ukrainian people living here. There are also Russians, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Tajiks. Putting just one name doesn't make sense." These sound bites were clean and balanced, which were suitable for broadcast. I captured the argument, but I felt I was missing the deeper human stories, emotions, and histories behind the words.[2] This experience left me with a sense of unfinished listening.

Journalism trained me to listen quickly, extract clarity, condense, and privilege what could be verified. But that discipline also made it difficult to hear the quieter, adjacent stories unfolding around me; stories needed endpoints, voices had to align with narratives I could responsibly publish. I eventually recognized this as a long-standing dilemma—a sense that I needed "another way" to listen. I don't remember the exact moment I realized that oral history was the alternative I was looking for. Even before I understood the ethical implications, I was convinced that this was the path that might allow me to hear what I previously missed.[3] In Fall 2024, I joined the Oral History Master's Program at Columbia University and returned to Brighton Beach with a recorder, open time, and a commitment to listening differently.

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[2] Jill Stauffer introduces the concept of "ethical loneliness," defined as the experience of abandonment by society and institutions after enduring injustice. She argues that institutions designed for hearing, including journalism, often fail to listen well, exacerbating "ethical loneliness." See, Jill Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard*. (Columbia University Press, 2015).

[3] Mark Feldstein describes journalism and oral history as "kissing cousins"—closely related but separate fields that can benefit from each other by sharing knowledge across boundaries. He argues that both can strengthen their own disciplines by learning from each other: journalism by adopting oral history's exhaustive and nuanced documentation and preservation of transcripts, and oral history by incorporating journalism's broader range of interviewing techniques, including adversarial encounters. See, Mark Feldstein, "Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History." *The Oral History Review* 31, no.1 (2004): 1–22.

The title of this oral history project, *Waiting for the Wind to Change,* is inspired by the Belarusian narrator. I did not decide in advance of the interviews that waiting would be the theme; it emerged inductively. I later noticed how often this idea appeared across the community, used by people whose legal situations, timelines, and political realities otherwise differed. The testimonies showed how recent political shifts, intensified by the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, continue to affect different post-Soviet lives in New York. This project taught me how people live with uncertainty and what it means to listen as stories unfold. Introducing oral history, I focused on what fell outside my journalistic frame: pauses, contradictions, concerns, silences, and feelings that resisted neat explanation. Listening to these kinds of fragments required attunement. In this sense, my project, *Waiting for the Wind to Change,* is not only a collection of oral histories but also an effort to explore the intersection of these disciplines by leveraging journalism's focus on the present moment while incorporating oral history's collaborative ethical approach.[4]

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[4] Readers interested in the curated documentary-novel manuscript may contact the author at ykf2002@columbia.edu

About the Stories and Images

This project sits between journalism and oral history: an experiment in what can—and cannot—be recorded. It includes six oral histories conducted in Brighton Beach and a self-interview that reveals my position as a listener. The project unfolds in four chapters that trace the evolution of my practice: from collecting stories to confronting silences, from examining symbols to reading the language of public spaces that absorb private histories.

The first, *Stories of the Latest Arrivals to the Community*, follows individuals who moved to New York from Belarus, Russia, and Kyrgyzstan after 2022, when Russia's full-scale invasion happened. The second, *Silence and Self-Interview*, examines unrealized interviews with Ukrainian refugees that were initially intended for the first chapter, revealing the ethical and emotional limits of interviewing. The third, *Stories of Flags*, examines how Ukrainian symbols circulate in daily life: a store worker who displays her country's flag in the window and a Catholic pastor who removed his. The final, *Stories of Neighborhood Signs*, centers on a shop owner who erased the word *Russia* from his storefront—a gesture that drew significant media attention as a symbol of canceling Russia in the neighborhood.

When I looked for models beyond the newsroom, I found one in the Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich, who assembles multiple voices into collective portraits of lived history. Her book *The Chernobyl Prayer: The Chronicles of the Future* examines how people adapted to the new reality after the nuclear disaster. In *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, she weaves a sweeping oral history of the Soviet Union's collapse and its aftermath. Awarded the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature for what the Swedish Academy called "documentary novels." She turns interviews into a chorus that moves on the boundary between reporting and fiction.[5] In her Nobel

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[5] The Nobel Prize Organization, "Nobel Prize in Literature 2015," *NobelPrize.Org.* Accessed October 29, 2025. https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2015/alexievich/facts/.

Lecture, she stated that history lives in the words and feelings of ordinary people—the words, phrases, and exclamations that could disappear without a trace—and that she wanted to appreciate them.[6]

In my project, the narratives are presented in the first person and follow a primarily continuous form. The texts are edited and curated from the raw oral history transcripts, with selected interviewer questions appearing in italics where they became part of the conversational flow and shaped the direction of the telling. The resulting narratives reflect the rhythms and language through which narrators chose to speak. The process and the rationale behind these editorial decisions are explained in the Methodology chapter.

The visual layer—the collages accompanying each narrative—recreates the interview moment and illustrates its content, composed of my photographs, fieldwork notes, and materials shared with my narrators.[7] Some narrators shared drawings, and others shared photographs. Embedded within the collages are texts that are traces of "off the record" moments: gestures, small talk, and ambient noise. In journalism, "off the record" signals erasure—what cannot be quoted under a promise of confidentiality. Here, it means something in a more literal sense: not yet recorded, still essential. In the interview part, I minimize my authorial voice so narrators can speak in their own rhythms. Yet the visuals expose the subjectivity I withhold in text. By pairing visuals with testimonies, I explore that knowledge is relational, partial, and embodied. *Waiting for the Wind to Change* is therefore an exploration of how narratives remain unfinished and continue to take shape beyond the moment of recording.

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[6] Svetlana Alexievich, "Nobel Prize in Literature 2015." *NobelPrize.Org.* Accessed October 30, 2025. https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2015/alexievich/25408-svetlana-alexievich-nobel-lecture-english/.

[7] See Appendix A for images.

Background

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought renewed attention to post-Soviet diasporas around the world. In Brighton Beach, the largest Russian-speaking community in the United States, long known by the Ukrainian port city's nickname "Little Odessa," the community became a focal point of media coverage, where the war's distant consequences were evident in everyday life.

In the days after the invasion, for example, Reuters reported that residents organized donation drives and hung Ukrainian flags as a visible response to the war.[8] In the months that followed, the New York Times described how the neighborhood became a support hub for newcomer Ukrainians by hosting information sessions, mobilizing volunteer networks, offering English classes and food assistance, and helping families navigate housing, schools, health care, and immigration paperwork.[9] As arrivals continued, multiple news outlets reported that Ukrainian refugees were seeking shelter in the area. By 2023, an estimated 40,000 displaced Ukrainians had arrived in New York City, many resettling in South Brooklyn neighborhoods, including Brighton Beach.[10]

Yet 2022 did not redefine Brighton Beach so much as reveal what was already there: a community whose make-up reflects a much longer history. Census data underscore this longer arc. According to 2023 data, 53.8 percent of area residents are foreign-born, most commonly

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[8] Maria Caspani and Jonathan Allen, "In New York's 'Little Odessa,' Ukrainians See Russians as Neighbors, Not Enemies." United States. *Reuters*, March 6, 2022.

[9] Lauren Hilgers, "They Fled Danger for New York. When Will Their New Lives Start?" Magazine. *The New York Times*, June 2, 2022.

[10] NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, *2023 Annual Report on New York City's Immigrant Population and Initiatives of the Office*. Accessed November 8, 2025. https://www.nyc.gov/assets/immigrants/downloads/pdf/MOIA-Annual-Report-2023_Final.pdf

from Ukraine and Russia.[11] Russian remains the dominant home language for 34.7 percent of households.[12] These demographics are the product of successive migrations: Holocaust survivors and displaced persons after World War II, Soviet Jewish émigrés in the 1970s, and families from a wide range of former Soviet republics—such as Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, and the Central Asian states—following the Soviet Union's collapse.[13] Annelise Orleck characterizes Brighton Beach as an "emotional and cultural home base" and a "symbolic portal of immigration through which many, if not most, Soviet immigrants pass, but like most immigrant ghettos, it has become a revolving door."[14] This dynamic extends to the newest arrivals, marking a further shift in the evolving post-Soviet landscape.

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[11] As of 2023, 53.8% of NYC-Brooklyn Community District 13--Coney Island & Brighton Beach PUMA, NY residents (59.2k people) were born outside of the United States. In 2022, the percentage of foreign-born citizens in the same area was 52%, meaning that the rate has been increasing. See, Data USA, "NYC-Brooklyn Community District 13--Coney Island & Brighton Beach PUMA, NY." Accessed November 8, 2025. https://datausa.io/profile/geo/nyc-brooklyn-community-district-13-coney-island-brighton-beach-puma-ny?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[12] While 67.1 percent of households in the area reported speaking a non-English language at home as their primary language, more than half of those households spoke Russian, followed by Spanish, Chinese, and "Ukrainian or Other Slavic Languages." See, Data USA, "NYC-Brooklyn Community District 13--Coney Island & Brighton Beach PUMA, NY." Accessed November 8, 2025. https://datausa.io/profile/geo/nyc-brooklyn-community-district-13-coney-island-brighton-beach-puma-ny?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

[13] Annelise Orleck and Elizabeth Cooke, *The Soviet Jewish Americans* (Brandeis University Press, 2001), 92-117.

[14] Ibid., 117.

Methodology

At the core of this project is a guiding question: *How do people live through uncertainty—and what does it mean to listen while the story is still unfolding?* I approached this question as a methodological experiment, exploring how oral history's practice of shared authority, together with what I call ethical hesitation, can offer a way to document the historical present without imposing resolution where none yet exists.

Methodologically, this work centers on the foundational concept in oral history practice: shared authority.[15] Michael Frisch uses this idea to describe the mutual engagement through which interviewer and narrator contribute distinct forms of expertise and resources.[16] He urges researchers to consider, within their own contexts, which forms of research, interpretation, and presentation enable shared authority. The idea does not eliminate the oral historian's responsibility but reframes it: the interviewer and the narrator share in constructing the final narrative. For me, adopting shared authority required confronting the power dynamics I carried from a traditional newsroom—habits of directing, clarifying, and controlling the story's frame— and learning to loosen that grip.

If shared authority redistributes power between the interviewer and the narrator, ethical hesitation is the stance that enables such redistribution. It is a deliberate slowing and pausing before asking, concluding, or shaping, potentially developing a new way of documenting. Ethical hesitation emerged through my process: recruitment, consent, interview design, translation,

[15] "Share Authority," *Oral History Association,* Accessed October 22, 2023. https://oralhistory.org/share-authority/.

[16] Michael H. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (State University of New York Press, 1990).

editing, and visual composition. This stance sought to allow narrators to define what could be said and what required protection.

Narrator Recruitment

Recruiting narrators in Brighton Beach made clear that agreeing to be interviewed was never a neutral act.[17] I met potential participants through a local English instructor or by approaching individuals directly, explaining the aims of my thesis and the possibility of future publication. Their decisions to participate were shaped as much by perceived vulnerability as by objective risk. Some declined due to identifiable concerns that posed concrete risks, such as a pending parole renewal.[18] Others withdrew for reasons harder to pinpoint: reputational exposure within their community, extending from family and neighbors to people they did not personally know, where speaking openly had consequences. Much of this concern could not be independently verified in the present context. Yet, it remained real in narrators' learned vigilance—shaped by past authoritarian surveillance, community expectations, or their own practices of self-protection. These forms of withholding reflected how people assess the social meaning of being interviewed; narratives shared with a researcher can be overheard, repeated, or misinterpreted. Before any recording could begin, trust had to stabilize long enough for speech to feel possible. Only after that did the question shift from whether a narrator would speak to how their story could be shared safely in a public context.

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[17] This is not unique to oral history; the same applies in journalism. A subject always has the agency to decline an interview for any reason, unless they are a public official or have made a commitment to grant the public access to their time.

[18] A Ukrainian woman who came to the United States under Uniting for Ukraine (U4U), a government humanitarian parole program created under the Biden administration, declined to be interviewed while she was applying for a new parole period. The request for re-parole is reviewed on a case-by-case basis, and she did not want to risk it.

Consent and Anonymity

Once the narrators agreed to participate, the ethical work did not end; it only took a different form. Consent became a continuing negotiation over what could be said, kept, or withdrawn. Each participant signed a consent form granting them full access to their transcripts and audio files for review, along with the option to choose anonymity.[19] These measures were not mechanical safeguards but necessities that emerged from the recruitment process; they allowed narrators to calibrate their own exposure and to determine how much risk they could bear in the public record.

Six narrators ultimately joined the project. Three elected to use their real names, while the other half chose to remain anonymous—two fully anonymous, and one using only their first name. Although the consent form offered the option to archive their interview recordings and transcripts under a Creative Commons Attribution license, none chose to do so, preferring to keep their raw material within our shared space.

Negotiating these decisions reshaped my understanding of accountability. In journalism, accountability is oriented toward the audience. Attribution—clearly naming who said what and where information comes from—is how it is demonstrated and how trust with the public is secured. Anonymity is tolerated only when indispensable, and even then, it must be justified to

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[19] See Appendix B for the consent, the Interview Agreement Form.

the audience.[20] Oral history approaches differently. It centers the narrator's agency, allowing them to determine how they wish to appear and what level of identification feels safe.[21]

I approached questions of anonymity on a case-by-case basis, attentive to the ethical stakes involved. As Mia Martin Hobbs notes, "There is a strong consensus that the decision to be named belongs to the interviewee, and that imposing anonymity on marginalized voices is paternalist and potentially disempowering."[22] Taking this tension into account, I invited narrators to set the terms of their own visibility through the consent process. In this way, consent became a living form of shared authority.

Interview Design

An interview structure is a form of power; it determines what can surface and when. Designing the interview meant considering how much authority I should exert—and when to step back—so that narrators could speak without feeling corrected, steered, or prematurely resolved.

I conducted all sessions in person, using a life-history approach that traced each narrator's trajectory from childhood through the present. Taking the time to gather a broader narrative

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[20] For example, the standards of the Associated Press state that material from anonymous sources may be used only if: the material is information and not opinion or speculation, and is vital to the report, the information is not available except under the conditions of anonymity imposed by the source, or the source is reliable and in a position to have direct knowledge of the information. See "Telling the Story," *The Associated Press*. Accessed October 27, 2025. https://www.ap.org/about/news-values-and-principles/telling-the-story/.

[21] In the Principles and Best Practices Glossary offered by the Oral History Association, it is explained that "a narrator may choose to have their name disassociated from any interview, or choose to utilize a pseudonym." See, "Anonymous," *Oral History Association*." Accessed October 22, 2023. https://oralhistory.org/anonymous/.

[22] Hobbs, Mia Martin. "(Un)Naming: Ethics, Agency, and Anonymity in Oral Histories with Veteran-Narrators." *The Oral History Review* 48, no. 1 (2021).

meant exploring life before a particular event. This was intended to present a wider picture of what the individual felt had been lost in that event. Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan explain that framing an interview as a life history provides a richer understanding of the narrator's temperament, personality, and background.[23] They emphasize that this approach facilitates the development of personal accounts within broader historical and political frameworks, including the ongoing conflicts, while leaving room for digressions and emotional pacing.

Every interview in this project began with the same question: "Can you introduce yourself to the mic?" This simple question gave narrators the authority to decide how they wished to appear in sound—to name, pause, or situate themselves on their own terms. This act of self-introduction was where people positioned themselves not only in relation to their story, but also in relation to the listener and the present moment. Each beginning revealed what could be spoken and what might remain unspoken. The question thus became both invitation and boundary, a small structure through which safety and self-definition were tested.

To distinguish my journalistic approach, I focused on the disciplines of temporal and emotional attentiveness. In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Svetlana Alexievich describes sitting "for a long time, sometimes a whole day… drinking tea, discussing hairstyles and recipes," until "suddenly comes this long-awaited moment when the person departs from the canon… and goes on to herself."[24] What I took from this was the discipline of attunement. While I often had flexibility in my schedule, my narrators could not always spare an entire day. In practice, this meant working within the temporal realities of their lives. The rhythm of meetings followed the narrators' lives rather than mine. I met most in advance to create familiarity; three of six returned for follow-up

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[23] Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan, *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 271.

[24] Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II,* trans. Larissa Volokhonsky and Richard Pevear (Random House Publishing Group, 2017).

sessions months later. Settings varied—homes, workplaces, cafés—each reflecting how and where people were willing to speak. Attunement, here, meant something quieter: listening without pressing toward revelation, allowing conversation to drift, and recognizing when emotional truth flickered briefly.

Additionally, to examine how material objects might influence interview dynamics and redistribute agency, I introduced tangible prompts. For two narrators, I brought an empty black photo frame and asked, "If you were to hold this frame yourself, what would you choose to show me?" I explained that in journalism, framing is typically the reporter's responsibility: the scene, angle, and interpretive meaning are selected by the interviewer. In this setting, I sought to invert that hierarchy. Placing the frame in the narrator's hands made the act of framing explicit and shifted the authority to decide what should come into view. One narrator, holding the frame, paused and asked me to share more about my own family first. He followed with his own questions, drawing on the broader context we had been discussing. Instead of simply responding to my prompts, the narrator actively shaped the direction of the exchange.[25] In moments like this, the frame became a tool for materializing shared authority, allowing narrators not only to select what to present but also to influence the structure and sequence of the conversation itself.

Translation and Transcription

Discussing language always brings hesitation for a non-native speaker, yet in this project, it became unavoidable because my linguistic position shaped how listening unfolded. English is not my first language, nor do I understand Russian. This fragility became the ground of listening, and this linguistic condition shaped the texture of our encounter.

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[25] A Belarusian narrator questions, "Is it hard to get from Japan to America?" "Do you need a visa to come to America?" "Can you have more than one citizenship in Japan?" "When Trump came into power again, did he make any noise for you?" Interviewed by Author (Yuri Fujita), Brooklyn, June 4, 2025.

This fragility around language was not my isolated experience, but one shared—albeit differently—by many of my narrators. Five of the six narrators in this project were non-native English speakers, and their comfort with the language varied greatly. English served as the basis for communication, functioning as our common yet uneven medium. Four narrators spoke primarily in English, while two relied on Google Translate—either intermittently or throughout the interview. I did not introduce Google Translate; instead, it was a tool my narrators were already familiar with in their daily lives. Rather than aiming for the ideal of unmediated conversation, I treated this application, with its pauses and errors, as part of the encounter. These mediated exchanges, though imperfect, became part of the method.[26] Using Google Translate created a unique rhythm in our conversations: I spoke in English, and my words were translated into Russian, while my narrators spoke in Russian, producing English text responses that I read aloud for the recorder. When we used Google Translate, we intentionally kept sentences short, since machine translation produces more reliable results when processing brief, discrete segments of text. Paradoxically, the delays it introduced made listening slower but more deliberate, forcing both of us to attend to each word.

For all recorded interviews, I produced full transcriptions in accordance with the Columbia Oral History Style Guide, which defines transcription as the act of representing "what a speaker intended to say" in written form.[27] Meanwhile, the Columbia transcription style guide is

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[26] Using Google Translate for academic research is controversial. While human interpreters can judge tone and intent when translating one language to another, applications like Google Translate cannot. This can cause problems from slightly awkward translations to ones that completely miss the mark and fail to communicate important information. Ideally, translations used in research should be double-checked by human translators to ensure accuracy, nuance, and fidelity to the original meaning.

[27] Caitlin Bertin-Mahieux, Mary Marshall Clark, and Liz Strong. "Oral History Transcription Style Guide." *Columbia University Center for Oral History Research*, 2022. https://incite.columbia.edu/api/download/674e10d3212bc.

primarily designed for archival use; I treated its procedures as a framework for reflection. I returned the full transcript and audio to every participant, allowing time for review, correction, or redaction. Narrators could re-encounter their words and decide how they wished to stand behind them.

As a note, I deviated from the style guide's instructions for portions where the narrators spoke to Google Translate in Russian.[28] Because the transcripts were intended for the narrators themselves, I printed their spoken Russian in the original Cyrillic alphabet beside the machine-generated English. Presenting both languages side by side is to make their traces legible.

Editing and Curating

Oral history practice accepts the necessity of editorial shaping.[29] But it insists that such intervention remain transparent. Coming from journalism, I initially found this disorienting. I was trained never to alter a direct quote—only to mark omissions with ellipses, insert brackets for clarification, or paraphrase when needed. I assumed first-person oral history narratives were similarly untouched. Learning oral history ethics required unlearning that assumption.

Spoken language differs fundamentally from printed text. Speech is relational: conversations move through omissions, interruptions, overlaps, and grammatical fragments held together by tone, pacing, and shared context. Oral historians think that editing is not a betrayal but a

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[28] The style guide advises that foreign languages that do not use a Latin alphabet should rely on standard phonetic spellings; when no standard phonetic spelling exists, or one cannot be found, spell the word as it sounds and mark it as phonetic in brackets the first time it appears in the transcript.

[29] Linda Shopes notes that editing from transcript to print publication has long been part of the oral history process, pointing out that well-respected oral history manuals devote extensive attention to editing. See, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds. *The Oral History Reader*. Third edition. (Routledge Readers in History, 2016), 470-489.

necessary act of translating an oral exchange into a readable form. Therefore, my task was to render the narrator's meaning, intention, and emotional cadence without altering the substance of what was said.[30] Each cut, condensation, or transposition was an interpretive act that revealed how elastic meanings can be. To acknowledge this openly, my curated work begins with an author's note explaining its edited nature and the principles guiding those choices. This note signals to readers that editing is part of the method and not a concealed intervention:

> The narratives in this book are drawn from oral history interviews I conducted between 2024 and 2025. Each story has been carefully edited and arranged. Pauses, repetitions, and silences have been selectively kept where they carried meanings. These texts should be read as documented novels, not raw transcriptions. Each person whose voice appears here read their story before it was published. Some revised or withheld parts; others left them untouched. What remains is not a record in the journalistic sense, but a shared attempt to stay true to the feeling of what was spoken.

Honoring the narrators' voices, I preserved first-person narration and the interview sequence to reflect the order in which the narrators spoke. I made selective cuts where repetition or digression obscured meanings, and I occasionally condensed or reorganized passages. However, I did not fabricate or reinterpret the material; all additions served to clarify context and were confirmed directly with narrators. After each editorial round, I returned the drafts for review, inviting corrections or amendments. This iterative process enacted shared authority, ensuring that the final narrative emerged through dialogue rather than unilateral decision.

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[30] Linda Shopes argues that editing interviews is an extended attempt to pay attention to "what is actually done with oral history." Yet, it aims at doing so in a manner that remains faithful to the oral, to the narrator's words and word order, speech patterns, and rhythm, as well as to the sense of what they are trying to say and the way that sense unfolds. See, *The Oral History Reader*. 470-489.

Visual Images

The visual layer, developed as a collage, was composed of fragments gathered during and after the interviews—photographs, my narrators' drawings, and headlines from news articles. They show that history also resides in what escapes the archive—tone, relation, and the process of creation itself. These materials made the environment and affective dimensions of the interview visible. The small talk with my narrators, background noises that slipped into the recording, and so on, provide further insight into the conditions that shaped the telling. Assembling the materials —selecting, cutting, and juxtaposing—was another way to register what texts, by themselves, couldn't contain.

The collages also draw readers into the project's autobiographical dimension. Embedded among the fragments are my field notes; moments of hesitation and questions left unasked foreground the interviewer's position within the process—the pauses, doubt, and contingencies through which listening takes form. The images also carry traces of the world pressing in around the interviews—January 7, 2025, when the screen in a cafe showed President-elect Trump's press conference before his inauguration[31], and August 16, 2025, the day after the Trump-Putin summit in Alaska.[32] These events underscore that history continued to extend beyond the interview frame. These collages function as counterparts to the edited narratives, making explicit what oral history records often leave implicit.

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[31] "What Trump Said about Canada, Mexico, NATO and Gaza Hostages at News Conference." *Reuters,* January 7, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/us/what-trump-said-about-canada-mexico-nato-gaza-hostages-news-conference-2025-01-07/.

[32] Jeff Mason, Trevor Hunnicutt, "Warm Words Contrast with Cold Reality of No Deal at Trump-Putin Summit." Media & Telecom. *Reuters*, August 16, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/takeaways-warm-words-contrast-with-cold-reality-no-deal-trump-putin-summit-2025-08-16/.

Reflecting on Method

This project began with a question shaped by my years in journalism: *Was there another way to listen and share?* As I returned to Brighton Beach to hear stories I had not been able to reach before, I needed an approach that moved beyond journalism's expectation of coherence and clarity. When I entered the field of oral history, I began to sense that sometimes the most honest firsthand stories remain unclear and unresolved. This realization changed what I tried to do in the interviews. Instead of pushing toward resolution, I wanted to stay with stories as they were shared. I began to reconsider the habits I had carried over from the newsroom. Beneath the professional ideal of objectivity, these practices inherently depended on subjective choices: listening for what was "newsworthy," selecting speakers who could provide "relevant" accounts, and preparing questions designed to translate a narrator's story into a coherent account for an audience.

To seek the "other way," as I described in the methodology chapter, I structured the project around shared authority: the principle of authority *with* rather than authority *over*. In practice, this meant asking narrators to define themselves in their own terms, returning transcripts and edited drafts for review, and revisiting several narrators months later to continue their stories. Shared authority extended to the visual work as well, where drawings, notes, and silences became co-authored elements. These practices also pushed me to reflect more deeply on my own positionality as an interviewer and the ways my presence shaped each encounter. If authority is shared, why would—or should—narrators choose to share it with me? This was a question I rarely faced as a journalist, and it surfaced most sharply when newly arrived Ukrainian refugees declined my requests for oral history interviews.

In the Self-Interview included in the curated work, I articulated this dilemma:

> I still ask myself why people hold back from taking part in *my* interviews. The question comes back to me all the time. Was it something I did? Language. Timing. Who I am. Where I come from. Maybe their listener doesn't have to be me. Maybe they'll find someone who makes them feel safer to talk to.

Although I often felt naive about my outsider status, I found it intellectually grounding to approach interviews as intersubjective encounters, in which both the narrator and the interviewer actively shape the dialogue. This understanding aligns with Amy Tooth Murphy's argument that the insider/outsider dynamic does not simply divide into "advantages" and "disadvantages," but generates distinct possibilities that lead to varied outcomes.[33] Outsiders cannot rely on shared culture, language, or community knowledge that may enable insiders to build a quick rapport.[34] At the same time, insiders face their own complications, such as assumptions, blind spots, or community expectations that may limit what is spoken. In contrast, outsiders may unsettle what is taken for granted and open space for disclosures that would not be voiced to someone within the community.[35]

In my fieldwork, this dynamic became clear when a Ukrainian saleswoman discussed the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza with me, noting that she would not share these views with others in Brighton Beach, a neighborhood with deep Jewish roots and strong public sympathy for

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[33] Amy Tooth Murphy examines the positive and negative ramifications of being an "insider interviewer" and compares them with being an "outsider interviewer." See, Amy Tooth Murphy, "Listening in, Listening out: Intersubjectivity and the Impact of Insider and Outsider Status in Oral History Interviews." *Oral History* 48, no. 1 (2020): 43.

[34] Ibid., 41.

[35] Ibid., 39.

Israel.[36] Similarly, a Russian asylee spoke openly about her ambivalence toward obtaining a green card, revealing concerns she had kept hidden from her own community.[37]

Yet I was also reminded that distance imposes boundaries. As Murphy warns, "If researchers are attempting to reach marginalised communities, they must be aware that they may be gifted some of those communities' stories, and that they may not."[38] This caution became evident in my own practice. Certain emotions and histories remained beyond my reach, shaped by linguistic, social, and cultural contexts I could not enter. Recognizing these boundaries became, paradoxically, an ethical foundation for listening. It allowed me to remain attentive to experiences I could not fully know.

When I was surprised—not because many Ukrainian refugees declined to participate in oral history interviews, but by the extent of change over the years [39]— I intentionally left blank pages in my work. These pages served as deliberate spaces for what could not yet be spoken. I read their silences as both testimony and self-protection, shaped by political contexts and the volatility of public discourse.

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[36] Angelina states, "People say, 'Israel is good.' I don't know. They have to talk about why people die. Sit down and talk—What do you want? You want space? But this space is the Gaza people. This space is the Ukrainian people." Interviewed by Author (Yuri Fujita), Brighton Beach, August 16, 2025.

[37] An anonymous Russian woman says, "We didn't tell anyone that we got a green card. People won't understand us. They'll think we're just fools, that we still want to return to Russia with an American green card." Interviewed by Author (Yuri Fujita), Brighton Beach, June 18, 2025.

[38] Murphy, "Listening in, Listening out," 43.

[39] In 2022, when I visited the Shorefront Jewish Community Council, which served as the community's support hub, the office was crowded—families, children, and individuals waiting for legal assistance, housing, jobs, and food. There was almost no hesitation, and many people wanted to explain what had happened. When I revisited Brighton Beach in 2024, that urgency wasn't the same; fewer sought to narrate it.

Gradually, I realized that the "other way" I was looking for was not just about using new techniques, but an epistemic shift in what could be known in an interview. Shared authority and ethical hesitation reshaped not only my interview style; they shifted my understanding of knowledge as something negotiated in relation, through what a narrator chose to disclose, revise, or withhold. When narrators corrected the assumptions embedded in my questions, or when an account unsettled the coherence I had expected, I began to interpret these moments not as problems to resolve, but as evidence of my own involvement in the encounter. The "other way" for me was to loosen the professional posture of objectivity I had relied on as a journalist and remain receptive to being changed by what my narrators made possible to hear.

Reflecting on Uncertainty

With oral history as a new epistemic lens, this project reframes understandings of how individuals navigate uncertainty and what it means to listen while stories are still unfolding. Uncertainty runs through this project not as an abstract concept but as a lived reality; neither the narrators nor I could foresee the outcomes of the histories we were discussing. In the interviews, people described their lives shaped by forces beyond their control, such as war, immigration law, shifting political power, tensions with their neighbors, and prolonged separation from family. These external conditions, of course, do not produce a uniform experience, but they lead to a shared temporal orientation: waiting.

Waiting emerged repeatedly as a mode of living under uncertainty. Initially, I observed this when a Belarusian man described continuing to pay rent for an apartment he no longer lived in, explaining that he was waiting for political conditions to change so that he could return. At the time, I heard this as an individual decision. Only later, through transcribing and curatorial work, did I begin to recognize how his language of waiting echoes across other interviews. A Ukrainian woman speaks of waiting for the war to end so that she can see her mother, who refused to leave her home and will not allow her daughter to return. A naturalized pastor urges his mother, who has immigrated from Ukraine, to wait for lawful permanent residence in the United States so that she can later travel freely to Poland and reunite with her grandchildren. A documented Russian asylee hesitates to celebrate receiving a U.S. green card, waiting instead to see whether returning to her country may still be possible, even as she worries about what that would mean for her daughters. A woman from Kyrgyzstan describes herself as waiting for her green card after fleeing from Russia, where her son was drafted into the Russian army. A shop owner, responding to tensions in the neighborhood, removed the word "Russia" from his storefront in an effort to create a calmer, more home-like space.

What they are waiting for differs.[40] What they collectively articulated, however, was a way of naming the present itself as waiting: a liminal condition between a past that cannot be returned to and a future that cannot yet be seen. This waiting, as heard in Brighton Beach, was historically situated: politically produced, only partially chosen, and prolonged over years.

This shared temporal language does not produce a shared inner experience either. The term "waiting" encompasses multiple expressions of uncertainty, including fear, exhaustion, disappointment, anxiety, sadness, concern, fatigue, endurance, hope, and solidarity.[41] Narrators frequently braid these terms together, combining words to articulate feelings that cannot be reduced to a single effect. Moreover, this inward uncertainty was articulated to *me* within a specific temporal and political context. The interviews reveal not a stabilized inner state but rather accounts shaped by the time at which the stories were told. As narrators describe their inner states within ongoing, unresolved conditions, the act of listening should not seek coherence, resolution, or emotional clarity. Waiting resists the demands imposed by many forms of public storytelling and requires staying with accounts that remain incomplete.

Waiting can also be a way for people to show agency when decision-making itself feels risky. I have learned that waiting is not just passive or inactive. It is more than simply pausing; it is a form of life that includes working, caring, raising children, learning new languages, and maintaining transnational ties. Attending to this active mode of living, without demanding clarity, is what it means to listen as the story continues to develop.

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[40] I include these partial syntheses with hesitation. While patterns emerged across interviews, I remain cautious about framing these accounts as a single, concise summary, as this could oversimplify differences and the nuances of how uncertainty is experienced.

[41] To attend to the distinct ways uncertainty is experienced, I invite readers to engage directly with the curated narratives. This project does not aim to provide psychological interpretations of interior states, focusing instead on how uncertainty is narrated and lived in specific contexts.

Future Directions

This project serves as the foundation for a future book-length oral history. I intend to continue listening within the same neighborhood. Six voices form an ensemble, but not yet a polyphony. Subsequent fieldwork will involve inviting new narrators and revisiting earlier participants to trace how their stories evolve as political winds and everyday life intersect. The objective is to examine how memory and belonging are continually reshaped over time as public attention shifts elsewhere under the pressures of repetition, forgetting, and change.

For future interviews, I am considering examining the newly added sign, "Ukrainian Way," which I mentioned in the introduction, which inspired this project. In the next phase of this work, I also want to focus on what people choose to reveal through the material objects around them. This would build on my earlier interviews, where national symbols, such as flags, often shaped the conversation. By turning to personal, everyday objects associated with the idea of home,[42] I hope to learn what these intimate materials can disclose about belonging, especially when national identity itself feels uncertain.

My first visit to Brighton Beach was as a journalist; my second, as a student oral historian, led to this curated work. I will now return a third time to continue this project, not to resolve the differences between journalism and oral history, but to hold them in tension. This ethical

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[42] Alisa Sopova, both a journalist and an anthropologist, presents a photo-essay featuring a collection of items that Ukrainian people carried and those they left behind during wartime. She shares photographs of objects, such as an enduring potted hibiscus, a stuffed dog traveling from Kyiv to Poland, and a piece of living-room wallpaper. The objects acquired voices that contained powerful effects as they became the last possessions between their owners' former life and bare life. Sopova traced Sherry Turkle's approach of "evocative objects," which Turkle defines as "emotional and intellectual companions that anchor memory, sustain relationships, and provoke new ideas." See Alisa Sopova, "Anxious Suitcases and Their Contents." *American Ethnologist* 50, no. 1 (2023), 54–64.

hesitation emerged only after I had come to understand the demands of both. This project, *Waiting for the Wind to Change*, anchored my understanding of how individuals live through uncertainty and what it means to listen as stories continue to unfold. As I continue this work, I remain attentive to the agency people hold. Rather than documenting only damage, pain, loss, or rupture, I will stay attentive to desire: the ways people continue to orient themselves toward the future, even under constrained conditions.[43] The "winds" described by my narrators were uneven and shifting. Yet as they waited for that wind to change, there was no sense of emptiness. Waiting marked lives in motion, oriented toward what might still emerge. I carry this attentiveness to agency forward as a listener living through the same historical present and as one among many waiting for the wind to change.

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[43] This orientation resonates with Eve Tuck's "desire-centered framework". See, Eve Tuck, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities." *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (2009): 409–28.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Visual Images

Do you feel comfortable talking about your story?
Narrator: Depends on what you want to talk about.
What topics are you interested in?

I am interested in the war.
Ah ha. Okay.
The country I came from is a participant in the ongoing war.

Would you say your country is involved?
This is the official position (Pause) in my opinion.

Journalists will frame you.
I want you to frame yourself.
If you hold this frame, what would you like to teach me?

Narrator:
First of all, I don't know you.
(Laugh).
You should tell me about your family.

Is it hard to get from Japan to America?
Do you need a visa?
Can you have more than one citizenship?

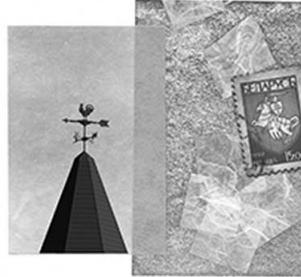When Trump came into power did he make any noise for you?

Narrator: The main events unfolded in Minsk.
But my hometown also had conflicts with the police.

The Kremlin won.
The staging ground for the attack on Ukraine was
        already cleared—the shortest route to Kyiv.

Did you also join the protest in 2020-2021?

Narrator:
Нет товарищ майор
в протестах не участвовал
Политику партии
и правительства одобряю
и поддерживаю
(Using Google Translate).
Вы поддерживали политику и правительство?
Очень интересно. Это активная или пассивная поддержка?
Narrator: This is the answer for the KGB investigator.

Did you talk with your parents today?
Narrator: Yes. (Smile).
What did you talk about?
I told them, "I'm taking a rest today.
        And I am going to meet my new friend."
I said your name, Yuri.
My mom was like "Wow." (Laugh).
Yuri is a male name in Russia. (Laugh together).

My daughter and I decide to draw more.
We add a big Trump fence.
        We saw it and crossed it.
        It was unfinished.
        We went through where it ended.

We crossed a river on foot.
        It was cold at night.

        We walked barefoot
        on the river
        with our children
        in our arms.

We spent four days
in the border area.
We weren't asked
why we were there.

I think the border guards
knew the reason.
Once we arrived in New York,
we contacted a lawyer
        to seek political asylum.

Now, it's all forgotten, like a bad dream.

happened. This ▮ between two nationals. After this happened,
take [took] my father, and they ▮ him and something, I didn't ▮
happened, he begin very big problem with his heart. After one ye

06
And when ▮ this ▮ d
everything f ▮ this ▮ beg
run. Because ▮ people, if they f
them. We se ▮ also see it. S
people ▮ , we begin ▮
[in] one hou ▮ [there was]
remember what's this place. It's like [a] forest. I don't remember
there. I [took] one car because when we run, I ▮ my kids. I do
stay only [alone], and people help me find my kids. I stayed at th
see [the] forest, [a] big field, long way river. I remember[the] riv
my little kids were five, six and eight. ▮ laughter was

13
I take narcotic ▮ ▮ the month.
also saw it ▮
everywhe ▮ army ▮ afraid
fa afraid ▮ bloodpressing
"My fath ▮ scared I ask i
partner's he ▮ cry.
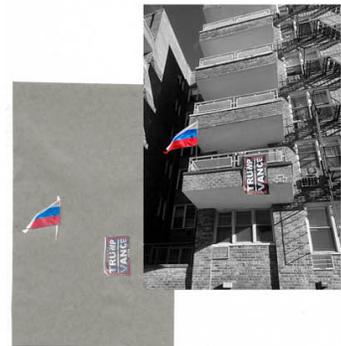
11
I ▮ my husband. I don't know where he [is] because we lost [h
beginning, he ran [away] when we ran, I don't know where his f
lived together with his father, his parents, his mother. His parents

---

[Time]

Can you introduce yourself to the mic?

[Followed by questions and answers].

Most likely it is not you, but the situation in the country towards Ukraine: Noone is sure in the future. Noone wants to harm themselves by any world said... 😄

Can I ask you... Do I look like I am not taking the situation in your country seriously?

Don't worry. You look good 👍
Sorry. I'm at work.

is making you hesitate, can y[ou] tell me what is bothering you. see many Ukrainians not wanting to talk... and I am wondering why...

You mean the situation in the US? I understand... words are risky... sometimes.

There is a WAR going on at our house. Three and a half years. IS THE ANSWER CLEAR?
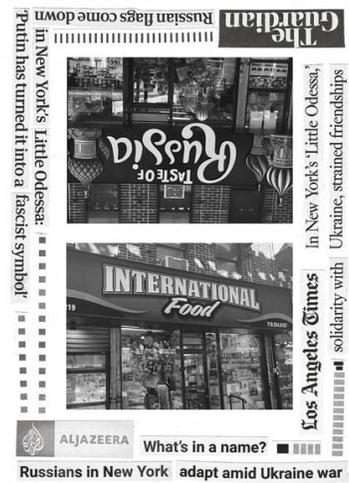

Can I ask you about these stickers?

Which stickers? I didn't put them on.
My customer did it.
He was a regular.
He moved to Philadelphia a long time ago.

I don't know anything about these flags.

GEORGIA   UNITE   I ♥ GEORG   not a state! but Count[ry]

Excuse me.
Do you remember there was a Russian flag
and a Trump flag together, months ago?
Neighbor: The man moved out with his family.
He's not here anymore.

Do you know where he is now?   Neighbor: No.

WAR in Ukraine   SUPPORT K A N

The Guardian
Russian flags come down in New York's 'Little Odessa,'
'Putin has turned it into a fascist symbol'
In New York's 'Little Odessa,
Ukraine, strained friendships
solidarity with
Los Angeles Times
Taste of Russia
INTERNATIONAL Food
ALJAZEERA   What's in a name?
Russians in New York adapt amid Ukraine war

Appendix B: Consent Form

<div align="center">Interview Agreement Form</div>

By signing this form, you agree to collaborate with Yuri Fujita on an oral history project titled "Stories Beyond the Media's Gaze." The project aims to promote stories that have been overlooked by media coverage and provide narrators to share their stories in their own words.

Participant's name:_____

Mailing address:_____ (Optional)

Birth date: _____ (Optional)

Phone: _____

Email: _____

In consideration of the recording of my interview, I, _____ , have permitted to record my voice for this oral history project. I understand that the following items **may** be created as part of my interview:
- Audio recording
- Transcript and summary
- Photograph images

I understand that the project aims to publish a book and is also part of Yuri Fujita's thesis at Columbia University, which is a requirement for completing a Master of Arts in Oral History. I agree that Yuri Fujita may share my interview with her professor and peers to get feedback on her work.

Narrator, please initial the following options if they apply:
_____I (the narrator) agreed to use my name
_____I (the narrator) do **not** want to use my name and want to be anonymous

_____I (the narrator) want my interview preserved in an institutional archive under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution license. This means that I retain the copyright, but that the public may freely distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon my work, even commercially, as long as they credit me for the original creation.

In return, the interviewer, Yuri Fujita, promises to send one copy of the interview recording, transcript, and related items to my email address above unless a physical address is required.

I understand I will have **thirty days** to review my interview and identify any parts I want to close or delete. I know that if I do not send any changes within thirty days after receiving my interview, the interview can be used without edits.

Any exceptions to this agreement must be listed below:

I agree to the terms described above.

_____ _____
Participant's signature   Date

_____ _____
Interviewer's signature date   Date

Any Questions?

Yuri Fujita, Phone: REMOVED, Email: ykf2002@columbia.edu[44]

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[44] In the original Interview Agreement Form, my phone number was included; it has been removed from the version attached here.