

“Biography is with its one leg
in the academia and with the other
in the public arena...”

Interview with Professor Hans Renders about the
crossroads of historical biography, oral history, and
microhistory

Hans Renders is a Professor of History and Biography Theory, and the director of the Biography Institute at the University of Groningen, Netherlands. He was a member of the founding committee of the Biographers International Organization (BIO). He has written biographies of the Dutch poet Jan Hanlo (1998), Dutch journalist and author Jan Campert (2004) and Dutch artist, painter, writer, poet, and architect Theo van Doesburg (2022). He is the editor of the Biographical Studies series at Brill. He has published studies on biography in various international journals and edited *Theoretical Discussions of Biography. Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing* (with Binne de Haan, Brill, 2014), *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History* (with Binne de Haan and Jonne Harmsma, Routledge, 2017), and *Fear of Theory: Towards a New Theoretical Justification of Biography* (with David Veltman, Brill, 2021). With Nigel Hamilton, he published in 2018 *The ABC of Modern Biography*. Jana Wohlmuth Markupová spoke with Hans Renders in Groningen in September 2023.

JWM: I read that you started as a literary critic.

HR: Yes.

JWM: And a journalist? What gained your interest in literature and journalism in the first place?

HR: In fact, journalism is not quite right. I wrote for newspapers and magazines, but it was always about literature, history, and art.

JWM: Okay.

HR: And I still do that. I review biographies for a national paper called *Het Parool* and for radio, every month. And I wrote some columns. But in fact, I was never a journalist at heart, although I taught journalism at the university. So, there are many journalists out there educated by me, but as for myself, I wasn't really a journalist.

But the culture of journalism is very important for the work of biography, as I discovered afterwards. Most biographers from academia follow a certain path to find sources, quite a different one to what a journalist would do. Today, oral history for biography is mostly nothing more than a *décor* to describe certain situations and subjectivities. Oral history often gives you ideas when someone is telling you something, and you think, "What is that?", and then you go to the archives. Most people do not have a good memory. Their story is almost a fantasy, which is normal, because people make their own stories and they remember more and more the retelling of their own story, not the story itself. So that is why oral history for biography is, on the one hand, very important. But it is not a source like a documentary historical source. Sometimes untrue stories do play a role in someone's public life. For example: in every biography of Barack Obama, for another 200 years, you will read about the political situation that some people, Donald Trump for example, but also others, said that he was not born in America. We now know that that is rubbish. He was born in America. But this story, this originally orally transmitted story, will stay in part important to the understanding of the contemporary reception of Barack Obama.

I guess every biography has three perspectives. The reconstruction of one's self-representation is one. Second is the perspective of the contemporaries; how someone was looked at, how people thought of him or her. The most important, most complicated perspective is the interpretative perspective of the biographer. Oral history is involved in at least one of these three perspectives. And I also think that in biography – be it a prime minister or poet or whoever –, if there is no possibility to connect the personal and the public in a framework, then you have no reason to write it. That is the issue I take with a lot of biographies of people from politics. Most of them would be more interesting, if they were just monographs on their work.

JWM: So where do you find the boundary between biography and literature?

HR: My main point is the same all the time: don't write a biography as a novel. That is very paradoxical because my thesis was a biography of a poet. I like poetry. But when I started in 2004 with the Biography Institute, people said, “That's a paradox. He's a full professor in history, working for the History Department, and writing about literature. And at the same time, he identifies with the world of historians.” To me, that doesn't seem paradoxical. But it has something to do with the misunderstanding when people say, “Oh, a historian is only interested in facts.” Now, of course, everyone knows objectivity does not exist. But you need to check your facts, to construct a convincing framework for interpretation.

To give an interpretation of someone means to answer the question of how much context can a person carry on his or her shoulders. And the answer in general, for me, is that a context is like a theatre. An actor stands in front of a *décor*. But when the *décor* stands in front of the actor, it is sociology. You need the *décor*, but it is not the main thing in biography.

But at the same time, if you make a plan for a biography, people ask, “How much context do you need in order to write or rewrite all the history of the Second World War in Eastern Europe, what else do you need?”. The answer is always in the representativeness of someone and the difference between the unique and the representative. That is a very important thing. If a biographer does not consider the relationship between a historical person and his context, he or she is putting his own values on that person. The most dangerous thing nowadays is to say: you have to see things as they happened in their time.

JWM: You already mentioned it, but what were the most common or the biggest misconceptions of biography that you had to face or explain?

HR: It begins with language. You hear all the time that he or she “deserves” a biography. Like deserving a statue. No one deserves a biography. Except when someone says it is interesting to write one. And of course, it is not only the language. Around 1980, and 1990, there was a split between biography as a statue and a critical interpretative biography. And it is not wrong. I don't like biographies where you read the first page and it says that he or she is a negative character, and then you

read 500 pages, and yes, he or she is a negative character. That is not interesting.

Biographer – and it is controversial these days – must go into the subject not as an activist, but as a researcher, an academic. And when you discover something nasty, okay, that’s it. Do you play table tennis?

JWM: Very badly, but yes.

HR: And what do you say when you are playing against someone, and you hit the corner of the table or just the net? And you score a point? What do you say? You say: sorry. But at the same time, you win a point. So that’s the same in biography.

You start to research someone’s life, and then halfway through, you discover that he killed seven people. Yes, it is good for your story, but people talk a lot about ethics in biography. To that I say: I think you should play fair and do good research.

There is also another problem. As I said, I review books regularly. And there is always a moment when I think, “Yes, it’s wise and fair what I wrote, but it’s not good for my story.” So then I think of my article. The text has to have a beginning, a middle and an end, and it needs to have a plot. And that is the same in the life of a biographer because life is random. You are sitting here and tomorrow you meet someone and then you move to Brazil. So that is not a big storyline. And the biographer gives the impression that just because you had good grades in history, you became a historian. Of course, that is not true. So the biographer has to admit – and that’s not bad news – that writing a biography is not a chronicle of life, but it is an interpretation of life. And then comes the battle between subjectivity and objectivity, and everybody has their values, but you have to be open about it.

And then it is interesting, because the same goes with a biography, it has a lifetime so to say, it is like a bottle of milk. It can last 10 days, but after 10 days it is outdated, and biographers don’t like that. And certainly, in small countries like Holland or Czechia, you don’t have so many biographies of one person. George Lucas made a list in 1997 and at that time, there were already thousand biographies of Hitler. It depends on what is your definition of biography. Václav Havel? Well, I think there are more biographies of Havel. If you go to the library and you want to read a biography of Tolstoy, you see seven biographies, you take the last one. And why is that? Because you are living in this period, you have

your own questions. Biography, I think, is a product of its time and biographers need to be aware of that.

This is also an answer to the question why people in England and Holland have been discussing for at least 30 years: whether biography is art, or science, the work of an academic? That is a very boring question because it gives the impression that a historian can get away with a poorly written book. And we have for example Johan Huizinga, a Dutch historian, who is still very popular all over the world, but he never said, “I’m writing novels.” So no matter how famous he is, his work is open to discussion and improvement. That is different from a work of art, we are not going to rewrite *Madame Bovary*.

And of course, there is no template for writing a biography, there are so many ways to write it. If you write a biography of Stalin, it is not necessary to go to the archives to find the most basic details of his life. Although we need the facts, the facts are not the main thing anymore. If you want to know when I was born, or where I live, or where I work, you can find that everywhere on the internet. There is no need to read a biography of 800 pages to look up certain life history facts.

JWM: Would you say that what a biography brings is not only what this person did, but also what it meant, what we can take from it, and what we should be aware of?

HR: What it meant. Do you know this book by Anne Applebaum about Eastern Europe?¹ Before it was published, Eastern Europe was Eastern Europe for us here in the West. Czechia was Eastern Europe, Poland, it was all the same. But because she is going deeper, we know much more about for example, the differences among Eastern European countries. So, I think, mainly, the value of biography is: what does it mean for us?

I always laugh when people say that they like autobiography more than biography. We have another word for these texts: ego-documents. And these are very different. That is why I don’t like the general term of Life Writing. What is Life Writing? The term Life Writing is an annexation of a breed of academics with an ideological agenda. An appropriation. There is no serious biographer who calls himself a Life Writer.

¹ ANNE APPLEBAUM, *Between East and West: Across the Borderlands of Europe*, New York 1994, reprinted by Random House, 1995; Penguin, 2015; and Anchor, 2017. ANNE APPLEBAUM, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944–1956*, London 2012.

Michael Holroyd has made some sensible comments about this, as has my friend Richard Holmes. I was a founding member of the Biographers International Organization in the US, and none of its hundreds of members will ever call themselves a Life Writer. Because if I tell you that I think I'm Jesus Christ, in memoirs, you can't say that's not true, because that's what I think. If I write it in an autobiography, you can say that is not true – so the ambition of memoirs and autobiography is very different. And then in memoirs, you now have this new word “memoir” without “s”. I don't like that. Memoirs is what someone remembers and is worth writing down where, memoir is an ideologically charged text that deliberately divorces itself from the actual truth.

Take Richard Holmes for example: I can give you thousand quotes of people saying, that he is a great biographer and that he is working with dreams of his sources. No one adds that he himself said, that he starts with thorough research in archives, and then the dreaming of the sources starts. And then there is this famous book *Footsteps*, in which he presents himself as a character in a biography of Robert Louis Stevenson.² It is a wonderful book. But if you see a book like that, at first glance you think “No, no, no”. But there are always exceptions.

He was here [in Groningen] and he was so surprised by all those Life Writers. He said that it starts with years and years in the archives and then the writing starts. But that is the same for a historian. Who is interested in a poorly written book? No one. In biography, this is even more pertinent, because biography is with its one leg in the academia and with the other in the public arena.

Nigel Hamilton published a nice article, after he came to Groningen – when he was already famous – and said that he wanted to write a dissertation, where he would explain the framework of his biographical research. I felt a little bit as if mice were attacking an elephant. But it was so fruitful because he never did these things.

He came all the way from Boston, and I said “No, Nigel, this is not good, this is not theory, this is ideology.” And then during his dinner speech, he said, “I came all the way from Boston to Groningen to learn that this is a piece of shit.” And he was right, and, in the end, he wrote a wonderful article, it is quoted all over the world now. It is called *Biog-*

² RICHARD HOLMES, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer*, London 1985. Current edition published by Harper Perennial.

raphy as a Corrective.³ We are not in court, we do not say who is guilty, but we can give a correction on someone’s reputation because, at the end of the day, that is the only thing people will remember. No one remembers your books, your body, only your reputation. It is a quote from Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, “A reputation is the only thing that lasts.” And the biographer is playing with that. You can give a correction. Certainly these days, many are condemned or rehabilitated. Reminds me of old Russia. People are condemned and after 40 years, someone says “Now, this is your rehabilitation.” Well, that is history.

JWM: You spoke about discussion of the theory of biographical research being somewhat divided between ideology and theory and, from my understanding, the misunderstanding of what theory actually is. And I know that you started this discussion with the book *Theoretical Discussions*, which was published in 2014.⁴ But 10 years before that you founded the Biography Institute. Can you tell me more about how that came about and how difficult it was?

HR: It was incredibly difficult. I mentioned the name Nigel Hamilton. He had a secret ambition when he came here; he wanted to start a biography institute in England. And they never managed because starting something new in the academic world? That is very difficult and even more so, if there is not a common consensus on where to place it.

I wanted the Biography Institute to be placed in the history department, not literature. Why? In the literature departments, every university – not only here –, is inspired by an American handbook from the 1950s by René Wellek and Austin Warren, who would say: only the text matters!⁵ That is the difference between Pierre Bourdieu and Roland Barthes. Barthes says: *l’écrivain est mort*, the writer is dead. The only thing left is the text. Bourdieu says: no, it is the culture you come from, the surroundings that matters.

And in literature, it was only interpreting. So, when I started to do my research for my own dissertation, which was a biography of the Dutch

³ NIGEL HAMILTON, *Biography as a Corrective*, in: *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History*, (edd.) Hans Renders, Binne de Haan, Jonne Harmsma, Abingdon-on-Thames 2016.

⁴ HANS RENDERS, BINNE DE HAAN. (edd.), *Theoretical Discussions of Biography. Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing*, Leiden 2014.

⁵ RENÉ WELLEK, AUSTIN WARREN, *Theory of Literature*, New York 1949.

poet Jan Hanlo,⁶ I thought ‘Wow’. I liked his work very much, but there were two things I realized right away. First, his works are very high in the canon – there is no need to defend them. Second, it is quite possible to write about the writer without going very deep into the analysis of his work. If you write about a prime minister, you cannot say, okay, he had some political ideas, we will leave that behind. That is not possible. If you write a biography of Steve Jobs, the biography does not explain how an iPhone works, but there is no need for that. So, I realized very soon that biography could explain something about this poet that we did not know before. So it was, so to speak, a thesis about a writer that went against Wellek and Warren.

Now, this may be a long answer to your question, what is theory? Theory is a way of research, which allows you to see things you did not notice before. You see patterns. That is the only good definition. I stole it from Wittgenstein. If I’m a doctor, and you say that you have problems with your ear, and I have thousand patients, who have problems with their ear, I can find a common reason. So that is a pattern. With biography, it is the same.

It was in the 1990s when Jan Hanlo was in every handbook because his status was so high. But I discovered he wrote his last poem before he published his first one. His work was finished in 1948. But he started publishing in 1949. This is important here because in every textbook on literature, Hanlo was classified as an active member of literary movements in the 1960s. But although he lived until 1969, he had nothing to do with those movements, he simply published in magazines that wanted him.

And when I discovered that, I thought okay, that is what a biography is for. Hanlo was, of course, known before I started my research, but I turned everything we knew about him on its head. Wilhelm Dilthey would say, that to understand the whole you have to research the parts, but that is not the same as researching one part and then you understand the whole.

So, in my case, it started long before that because I was reading and writing about literature, and like everyone, I was fond of biographies of the Bloomsbury group, Virginia Woolf, Keynes, and all those people. But before I ended my dissertation, I was not concerned with that so much

⁶ Jan Hanlo (1912–1969) was a Dutch poet. HANS RENDERS, *Zo meen ik dat jij ook bent. Biografie van Jan Hanlo*, Amsterdam 1998. New edition Amsterdam 2007.

anymore, I wanted to write about this general observation: what is biography? People say, “Oh theory, I don’t like theory. I want to write a good book.” And you see nowadays, it’s like car driving. If you drive a car for 10 years, and I ask you: what do you do with your feet? You don’t know. But you learned it. Or, when you are building a house and you want to put the roof on it, you need scaffolding. I discovered fairly soon that it’s useful to learn certain things.

Later, my ideas developed and in 2002, I thought, if biography comes to academia, like every discipline at university, you need a theoretical framework. So that is where I started in the field. At that time I published a lot in Dutch magazines and wrote books, but then I thought, what is the future of a university, which is international? And theory doesn’t stop at the Dutch borders. So that is more or less my own motivation.

And to your other question, it was incredibly difficult. Because I knew exactly what I wanted. And universities don’t like that. So when I started, I said, in three years, I will do this, this, and that, and if not, then we stop with it. And I did that to convince them. But it took a long, long time before there was a real institute crowned with a real chair as full professor. And now everyone says that it is great. And of course, now we have the most dissertations and international publications of the whole faculty. But I am almost sure my successor will not be a specialist in biography, he, or she will be a Life Writer. So that makes me a little pessimistic.

Anyway, the institute started in 2004. And I was very active in making it international. That is why I helped the biography centre at the University of Vienna when it started. It no longer exists. At that time, the only other one was the institute in Hawaii. And until today, they have the only peer-reviewed journal for biography. But since 1993, they never published an article about biography. It is only about Life Writing. It reminds me of that beautiful song by Aretha Franklin “Killing Me Softly”. For years we have tried to provide the genre of biography with a theoretical foundation and to get it accepted by the academic world. Now that that has finally happened, there is a process of “killing me softly”.

Some say these *Theoretical Discussions* is a strange book because one of the collaborators does not agree with Renders, because it is about Life Writing. But I wanted to know what was going on there! And this was a very interesting experience for me. That used to be the good thing about the academic world. Even if you don’t agree, you can have an interesting discussion. I admit, this is an old-fashioned attitude nowadays.

So I started with theory. And of course, like with every theory, when you read it, as a student, or as an academic, you might say after reading: most of it is not interesting for me, I don't need that. But when it comes to a theoretical framework, it is easy to make it international. If I'm a little bit famous, that's because of the Life Writers who invited me all over the world. They said, what is Life Writing? They asked me!

JWM: (laughs) What did you say?

HR: I said, I can only explain why I don't like it. (smiles) Because there is no theoretical framework. Everything is Life Writing. But if something is everything, it means it is nothing. I understand the ambition, but to bring discipline to academia, you need theory.

When I was in Canberra, where I spent a few months as a visiting professor, I was involved from the beginning with the journal called the *Australian Journal of Biography and History*. When I was in Aix-en-Provence, I started the Biography Society. To push people to think. And that is very interesting about the international community. One of the books is called *Different Lives*.⁷ That's because I realized I didn't know anything about biography in Russia. Or China. Because every biography of Lenin or Stalin we have here is always written by Americans, Brits, etc. So I invited Russian scholars – now it is not possible – to explain. So that was the first ambition of this book: to know what is going on in other countries. Every region has different milestones that influence it: for example, apartheid in South Africa, the Civil War in Spain, World War II in Europe, and elsewhere.

I mentioned biography in the UK. We know that since 2017 the number of published biographies declined by almost fifty percent. The world of biography has changed enormously. England is not there anymore. France? Okay, biographies of De Gaulle or Napoleon. Germany? Max Weber, wonderful biographies. But if you want to read about many others, like the French surrealist Philippe Soupault or Leonardo Da Vinci, you need to read American biographies. And that has all changed in 20 years, in my opinion, for two reasons.

When I published the biography of a Dutch poet in 2005, my publisher did not want it to have any footnotes. They wanted to put them on the internet. I said, if you do that, you cannot publish my book (finally it

⁷ HANS RENDERS, DAVID VELTMAN (edd.), *Different Lives: Global Perspectives on Biography in Public Cultures and Societies*, Leiden 2020.

was published with the footnotes). Now? Now the first thing a publisher asks is where is the theoretical chapter? Because the readers are educated and want to read an explanation of your working method and about the source material used, which is why, I guess, biography developed so much.

The second reason is that there were people who really fought for biography to be taken seriously in the academic world. People like Nigel Hamilton failed not because they were incompetent, but because it was difficult. And even if some biography institutes were founded – like the one in Vienna – shortly after that there came different influences and then there was Life Writing.

In 2009 or 2010 we founded the Biographers International Organization, where I was the only non-American board member. And that was very inspiring for me because in America they have this tradition of reportage, the factual but at the same time well-written nonfiction. Here we have strange terms such as “bio fiction” or “literary nonfiction”. What is that? Language is so revealing. In America, every book has to be well written – nonfiction too.

These two traditions came together, let’s say 15 years ago, and American tradition won because it has influenced this corrective nature of biography. You will never read a corrective in Life Writing; everyone is either good or bad and that will never change. It is always confirming our ideas. Biography is very different. That doesn’t mean we have to change someone’s reputation. But if the sources reveal something completely new, then you need to do that.

JWM: We talked about it earlier, but the idea of starting research with the main aim to confirm something I already know and to expand this knowledge seems very paradoxical to me.

HR: Because you are educated as a historian and that is a huge difference. But back then, when I wrote the Jan Hanlo biography, it was exceptional because he was not only very famous, but also a paedophile, which was never mentioned before. And it was not my goal, but I was the first one to talk with those boys, who were basically my age when I spoke to them.

There was this one boy named Mohamed, who lived in Morocco. He was illiterate and a prostitute, but he was a very wise man. I spent a whole week with him, in the evenings with his family and children, in his tent in the sub-Sahara. I could not tell him I sought a confirmation

that my hero was castrated, so we talked about everything else and then one day, he casually mentioned that Hanlo had his sexual organ *mutilé*. Just like that, out of the blue. It is a terrible story, but in that table tennis metaphor, for me as a biographer, it was a success! I had an idea, but I had to know it. Then I met other people, who were in their eighties, who were also castrated and told me all about it... Things like these make the work of biography important. But it is a huge responsibility because you cannot write about these private things about people unless you are absolutely sure what is going on.

Later, I discovered, – and this is an example of the difference between representativeness and uniqueness – that there are many such people. The United Nations offers many statistics: you can see how many people had a heart attack in Germany or in Spain and so on. And you can also find that officially, in the Netherlands until 1978, several dozen people were castrated, whilst I proved that in the clinic, where my poet was, in that clinic alone, there were hundreds of them. Until today I get asked to give lectures on this topic at clinics because I was the only one to talk to these people. So, this is difficult, and you need courage as a biographer.

Concerning theory, Hanlo was not unique. He was a representative of the Catholic world. I explained how this was possible. And after I did this work about this sensitive subject, I thought yes, you can actually tell something about the big story by using one person and do the research from there.

JWM: That reminds me of your book *Fear of Theory*⁸, where you stated that the relationship between biography and microhistory is something that might be fruitful for the future. And you said that we are now in a third wave of microhistory, where this connection of microhistory with biographical research is what we should do. Can you elaborate on that, please?

HR: Yes, I said that when people don't agree they start to belittle each other. But one of my best friends is Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, who established the Centre for Microhistorical Research in Iceland. And I don't agree with him at all! But our disputes are always very fruitful and in fact, we are working on a book on microhistory right now.

⁸ HANS RENDERS, DAVID VELTMAN (edd.), *Fear of theory: towards a new theoretical justification of biography*, Leiden 2022.

To put it briefly, microhistory started with Ginzburg and his Menocchio, when we learnt a lot about the life of “ordinary peasant people” in Friuli in the 16th century, and with Le Roy Ladurie and the village of Montaillou in the 14th century.⁹ And that was the first phase. Then came the second “Italian” wave and it was, more or less, an ideological phase for me. And then – this is very arrogant of me – in 2004 or 2005, there was this huge five-yearly world conference for historians in Amsterdam, and all those microhistorians, like Levi and Ginzburg, they were all there. Unofficially, I managed to be with those people on one panel. And I said, “Well, that is interesting, but now we are in the third phase.” And then I became friends with those people, and they said, “You’re right, you’re right.”

And what is this third phase – and that is what Siggí [Magnússon] is not happy with – I said, you need to look to the exceptions not to the examples. So, Montaillou gives us an idea of this village. But if you want, if you believe, like I do, in the third phase, you go to a beach, you examine a grain of sand and see if it meets our definition of beach sand. So that is different from looking for confirmation of what sand is. But by going deeper into this small sample of sand, you can maybe change the definition of the beach a little bit. So that is not confirming. That is a way of looking at reality as Karl Popper has already described it.

For me, microhistory is a never-successful attempt to change our ideas of reality. And that is what I like about this connection with biography. And why I like microhistory in the third phase, because there is also so much misunderstanding. There are quite a few books where people claim that microhistory is writing about small things. No, microhistory is a method that has nothing to do with small or big. But it is a method of researching the small to say something of the big. That was not so clear in the second phase, so we tried to approach it theoretically. But not to be theoretical but because it gives a framework for biographers.

Of course, others may not agree with me, but it is nice to see we can have a discussion and disagree politely and then move forward together. I am sure someday, somebody will say that *Theoretical Discussions* was an interesting book (according to Worldcat.org, there are more than a thousand academic institutions in the world that have this book in their

⁹ CARLO GINZBURG, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, New York 1982. EMMANUEL LE ROY LADURIE, *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village 1294–1324*, London 1978.

collection, not to mention the individuals, who purchased this book), but now there is something new. And understandably so, because the world is changing, ideologies change, everything changes, and it is very interesting.

JWM: I was just going to ask you what you think the biggest challenges are for biographies in the future, but now I understand.

HR: Well, to speak freely. That is very important even if the message is not. This is the biggest challenge; that biographers have the courage to speak freely even if the message is not pleasant. And to do their research in freedom, no matter what they are finding.

JWM: Even if the biographer would problematise the image of the person that he or she is writing about, they have to have the courage to do that. If you don't have the courage, don't do biography.

HR: That's what it is. That's why we have universities, and we have to protect students; even if they say stupid things, they are in a process and they need to have the space to do experiments, which I think is a huge challenge for the future. Because I see more and more that history is used as an illustration of an idea. History is increasingly used as an institutional weapon by politicians.

Standing up for people is very important maybe in your private life, but not in your academic vocation. Once, I made a full room in Utrecht very angry, when I said, "During nine to five, I study the world and see how awful the world is. And in the night, I weep about it, but not during office time. I'm not paid for that." I wanted to provoke them a bit, of course, but I found that very interesting because it showed how the times have changed. Had I said that 20 years ago, everyone would say "Yes, of course." But this was three years ago, and some people still hate me.

JWM: Let's get back briefly to biography and microhistory. You mentioned that you are working on a book with Sigurður Magnússon.

HR: Yes, not only with him, but also with a few other people. Others from Hungary, Giovanni Levi, and Siggí. It is in a very early stage, but we want to bring those opinions – and as I said, I have a very different opinion from Siggí – together. Siggí is not so interested in this difference between uniqueness and representativeness, probably also because of his Icelandic background, but for biography, I think that is where we start-

ed, you need to have an answer. How much context can a biography take on its shoulders?

Frank Sinatra had a song called “You’ll Never Walk Alone”, which illustrates why I do not believe in group biography. Every biography automatically has a group perspective because you never walk alone. You talk about family members, colleagues, and friends not only because they exist, but because they influence the agency of this one person.

If you have a huge archive, what can you research? Where does it stop? I know a biographer, who worked on a biography for 52 years. You know, 52 years! And you will not be surprised to hear that it was not a good biography. You cannot work on a biography for that long. There is only one exception. Robert Caro with his works on Lyndon B. Johnson.¹⁰ He is now working on the fifth volume, his editor just passed away. He worked with the same editor for more than 40 years. That’s an exception.

JWM: And just like in biographical research, you should know where to stop, so let’s just stop right here. (smiles)

HR: Maybe we can stop. Unless you have a question.

JWM: I would have many questions, but we can get back to them another time.

HR: I’m happy to come to Prague to tell more about biography.

JWM: So until then – thank you very much.

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¹⁰ ROBERT A. CARO, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Path to Power*, New York 1982; ROBERT A. CARO, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Means of Ascent*, New York 1990; ROBERT A. CARO, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate*, New York 2002; ROBERT A. CARO, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: The Passage of Power*, New York 2012.