

*AGNIESZKA STEC  
Warsaw University/Poland  
Expert of LINGUA/Switzerland*

## **How to prepare and conduct a good interview in order to ensure a sufficient amount of data for the expertise, from the expert's point of view**

In my presentation, I will analyze the conditions which an interview has to meet in order to be successful. This is an important stage in the process of determining the applicant's origin. Such interviews have to provide sufficient data to enable identification of the applicant's place of socialization, which is necessary information for both repatriation and asylum procedures.

At the beginning of this presentation, let me explain some terms. So, an applicant is a person who applies for asylum or must be repatriated and has no identity documents which could confirm his or her origin. For that reason the interview is conducted to obtain information which will either prove or disprove the applicant's claims about his/her origin. The expert is a person who carries out the interview. The expert should be a specialist in the region where the alleged place of the applicant's socialization is located. The expert is generally the same person who uses the interview to analyze both the applicant's knowledge of the indicated places of living and his/her command of the languages/dialects spoken in the places indicated by the applicant as his/her residence. Then the expert writes an expertise at the scientific level, which contains a conclusion about the applicant's possible origin.

Each interview usually has to be conducted in accordance with the guidelines worked out by the institution which orders the interview from the expert. The guidelines generally include: the duration of the interview, obligatory questions about 'personal data' of the applicant and suggested topics for the questions to check the applicant's knowledge of the alleged country (-ies) of his/her origin, its culture and everyday life. Other guidelines concern the applicant's languages or dialects skills. Obviously, all those questions have to be adapted individually to the applicant. The interviewer must modify suggested topics of the questions

and apply an individual approach to each interview. We cannot use one scheme of the interview all the time!

I can conclude from my experience that the interviewer has to take some action before and during the interview to be able to conduct a good interview, which will ensure a sufficient amount of data for the analysis of the applicant's origin. Now I would like to list the stages of the interview and share my remarks on them. Please notice that all those stages and remarks can be used in any interview, regardless of the applicant's origin or language skills.

1). The first and the very important preliminary step must include an analysis and verification of the entire information about the applicant available before the interview, which is received from the preliminary interview with the applicant. In my opinion, it is very important to provide the expert with as much information about the applicant as possible. This can prevent some unexpected situations during the interview, e.g. when the applicant lived in a third country and our specialization as an expert does not include knowledge about that country. The information received before an interview about the applicant's stay in some places could give the expert an opportunity to gather some information about those places and even the languages/dialects spoken there. Such information could also help in determining the applicant's origin more precisely. The expert should pay attention to any possible inconsistencies in this information, e.g. when the applicant gives wrong data about the place where he or she lived, the names of the streets which do not exist in the place of the applicant's alleged origin or even when the place itself does not exist. At this stage of the interview, some ideas about the applicant, which build the general vision of the interview, are developed. The interviewer can prepare on that base a number of questions that could be used during the interview, directly in the language indicated by the applicant as his/her mother tongue. All the prepared questions have to be arranged in the order they will be asked, and the interviewer has to set a plan to stick to during the interview.

2). The second step consists of the obligatory questions about the applicant's personal data, which should open the interview. The interviewer has to check the information about the applicant obtained from the institution which has ordered the interview from the expert. So, the interviewer should ask about the applicant's nationality/ethnicity, place of the applicant's birth, all the places of residence and duration of stay in all those places, stay in third countries, education, profession and all the places of work, mother tongue, other languages and origin of the applicant's parents. Besides those, the interviewer has to ask about all identity documents that the applicant could have through out his/her life (e.g. passport, driving license and so on). The question about the citizenship is just a formality, because the applicants usually do not

say the truth about that. In some cases we could also ask about the conscription to the army. It is important to form those questions in such a way, so as to get the greatest possible amount of information about the applicant. This information will be used by the expert as a basis for reconstructing the applicant's biography in the chronological order (from the day of birth until the day of escape and arrival to the country where the applicant has applied for asylum or from which he/she must be repatriated). Questions about the applicant's family are also very important at this stage of the interview. The interviewer can ask not only about the applicant's parents, but also about other relatives, own family and children and even girl/boy friends – who they are, where they live and where they work. This moment of the interview is very important to win the applicant's trust. We usually like people who are ready to hear our family stories and our complaints about life. In my opinion, it is necessary to let them talk because, firstly, we receive more and more information about the applicant, which is useful to determine his/her origin, and, secondly, we can gain the applicant's trust, which can pay off later, when the applicant will have to answer further, more difficult questions. In this part of the interview additional questions usually appear, that have to be asked in the next part of the interview, as e.g. about the applicant's religion. In conclusion, let me repeat that the questions about the personal data are very important. It is necessary to gather and verify all the information about the applicant received from the preliminary interview, which was carried out by asylum authorities.

3). The third step in the interview should include detailed questions about all the places indicated by the applicant as his/her residences as well as questions concerning the knowledge about the country where such places are located, their culture and everyday life. It is very important to adjust those questions individually to the applicant (e.g. to his/her age, education, religion, origin of the applicant's parents and supposed applicant's origin) and to the special situation existing in the country where the indicated places are located, as well. We must remember that some regions of the world require a special, different approach (e.g. the territory of the former Soviet Union).

The interviewer has to start with the detailed geographical questions about all the places indicated by the applicant as the places where he/she lived. It will be easier, when we divide the questions in that part according to countries where the places are situated (of course, if more than one country is involved). Firstly, the interviewer should ask about the city/town/village indicated by the applicant. These questions could be about the names of the streets near the place where the applicant lived and the main streets in the centre of that place; what can be found in the neighborhood of the place where he/she lived; the names of the

quarters; interesting places in the centre – i.e. monuments, well-known buildings, government buildings, the names of the cinemas, theatres, restaurants, pubs, banks, bigger stores, bazaars and also where they are and what some of them look like; whether there is an airport and a railway station and where they are; and where the main post office is. Then the expert has to ask about the geography of the place (e.g. if there are any rivers, lakes, mountains and what their names are); the history of the places indicated by the applicant as his/her places of living; any changes of the names of those places; their administrative statuses; how many people live there; the post and phone codes; transportation system in all those places; connections between the places; whether there are any churches, synagogues, mosques or other places of the religious cult (it depends on the applicant's religion) and where they are located. Additionally, the interviewer can ask about the neighborhood of the place; what that region of the country is called and in what part of the country it is. The expert also has to ask to describe that region (e.g. to name the cities/towns, rivers, lakes, some well-known places and describe the climate, distances and characteristic features). Apart from that, the interviewer should also ask about the geography of the country (to name the capital city, towns, regions, rivers, mountains, seas and so on).

The next set of questions should concern everyday life in all the places mentioned by the applicant as his/her places of living. The expert should ask about the prices (e.g. of bread and tickets), the monetary system, the names of the banks, public holidays, colours of the post-boxes, mobile phone networks, newspapers, school system, what the identity documents look like, the flag and the national emblem of all the countries indicated by the applicant as his/her places of living, the national dishes in all those places and also how they cook them and what the local differences between one and the same dish are, and the brands of local mineral waters. Usually, the interviewer does not need to ask questions about cigarette brands and alcohol and beer (with one exception, if a tobacco plant, distillery or a local brewery exists in the places mentioned by the applicant as his/her places of living), because most of them are not specific for one country. They are usually well-known all over the territory of one country. The expert can also ask about the national dresses in all the places mentioned by the applicant as his/her places of living. In addition to that, the question about politics could appear, e.g. the names of the presidents, prime ministers, political system, political parties and first of all about the interesting political events which happened in the country (-ies) at the time when the applicant lived there. Besides those, the interviewer can also ask about the religious situation in all the countries mentioned by the applicant and in a very detailed way about the religion declared by the applicant (what the temple looks like inside, the holy

figures, the holy places near the area where the applicant lived, religious holidays and the principles of the faith). Usually, when the applicant is not an educated person, the expert should not ask questions about the literature and history of the countries indicated by the applicant as his/her places of residence. In my opinion, questions about the music and TV channels are not always useful; we must adjust them, like the other questions, to the characteristic situation existing in the country where the applicant lived, according to the applicant's claims. Please remember that the expert should not ask about the commonly known facts or about those which are not specific for the given country! The interviewer should try to find something that could be known only by a person who really lived in the indicated places (e.g. which could not be learnt from the Internet, books and maps).

4). I also have to tackle the language question. It is very important to conduct the interview in the language declared by the applicant as his/her mother tongue. Nevertheless, the expert has to check the applicant's command of all the languages reportedly known by the applicant as well as those spoken in all the countries where the applicant lived. In addition to the conversation, at this stage of the interview, the applicant should also be asked to translate some words and phrases from the language indicated by the applicant as his/her native tongue into the languages of all the countries where the applicant resided and vice versa. As a rule, such phrases and words should concern everyday life. The interviewer should also try to find some words which could be known only in the area indicated by the applicant as his/her place of residence; which means some local dialect words. The applicant's language skills can reveal whether he/she really lived in the indicated places for the declared period of time. An expert should also pay attention to the features of the applicant's pronunciation from the first moment of the conversation to make sure whether it has or not any dialect or local features and whether occurrence of such features is possible or not in the territory suggested by the applicant as his/her place of living. The way people speak has a strong connection with how and where they were socialized. However, linguistic analysis cannot always help fully answer the question of language socialization. We must remember about the specific linguistic situation in some countries and sometimes we cannot put the applicant's knowledge about the country on a par with the applicant's linguistic competence!

5). I also have to mention some difficulties that the expert can meet at the time of the interview. One of them can appear when the applicant is not willing to collaborate and disturbs the expert during the interview, e.g. lies or answers to most questions 'I do not remember' or 'I do not know'. To cope with the situation, the interviewer should always try building a nice atmosphere from the beginning to the end of the interview so that the applicant

does not feel as if he/she was interrogated and treated as a suspect. It is not a good strategy to show that we know that the applicant is lying, so as not to put them on guard. If the applicant does not want to talk, the interviewer should try to make them involved in the conversation. In such event it is important to keep the conversation going. Sometimes the interviewer should ask the applicant about something which is not essential for the main line of the interview but could help become engaged in the conversation. The expert should find an individual ‘key’ to the applicant. Moreover, at the beginning of the interview the expert must take care to make the applicant clearly understand who the interviewer is and what the interviewer expects from the applicant.

I also must say something about the anonymity during the interview. Some people can find this uncomfortable during a conversation. However in my opinion, it is a good solution, both for the expert and for the applicant. It eliminates things that could affect the course of the interview, if it was conducted on a face-to-face basis, e.g. when the expert is a young woman. The anonymity also helps us obtain more information from the applicant, because sometimes people can say more by the phone than in a face-to-face conversation.

Moreover, we can get into a difficult situation when we find out during the interview that the applicant resided in a country and we have not been informed about that before the interview. Rescue in such a situation can only be found in the expert’s extensive knowledge, which covers a greater scope than his/her main specialization. In my opinion, the expert should have knowledge of the entire political or geographical region and not only of one country, to prevent such situations as mentioned above and to better understand the essence of his/her own specialization.

The next difficult situation during the interview can appear when the interviewer starts to suspect that the information given by the applicant could be untrue. The first moment when we may start suspecting the applicant is some inconsistency in the information received from the preliminary interview. Then, as the interviewer starts asking the applicant about his/her previous places of residence and the descriptions are incorrect, the expert’s suspicion grows. However, when the applicant’s descriptions are correct, further questions could confirm that he/she really comes from the place of origin suggested by the applicant. Otherwise the interviewer should try to look for new possibilities of the applicant’s origin, using all the information given by him/her and also the applicant’s manner of speaking. For that purpose the interviewer has to ask a number of questions. I must add, that in many cases analysis of the facts received during the interview can indicate a different place of the applicant’s origin than suggested by him/her.

An attempt should also be made to answer the question what necessary competences the expert must have. Judging from my experience, the expert should be a qualified linguist or philologist with extensive knowledge, which covers a broader scope than his/her major specialization (the entire political or geographical region and not just an area limited only to one country). The expert should know fluently more than one language spoken in a given political or geographical region. It is also important to have some knowledge of the languages spoken in the neighboring countries so as to be able to compare them, let alone dialects of a given language. It is simply insufficient for the expert to be only a native speaker or interpreter. However, we must remember that it is difficult to find qualified experts for some regions of the world.

At the end of this presentation, I would like to stress once more that using the guidelines developed by the institution, the expert should always find an individual approach to the applicant. The expert cannot use one scheme of the interview. The expert should react to any inconsistencies in the applicant's answers and also to unexpected features in the applicant's speech. Exact questions asked during the interview should help us form our subsequent opinion about the possible origin of the applicant! When we want to ask questions, we must think what kind of answer we will receive and whether we really need them to determine the origin of the applicant.