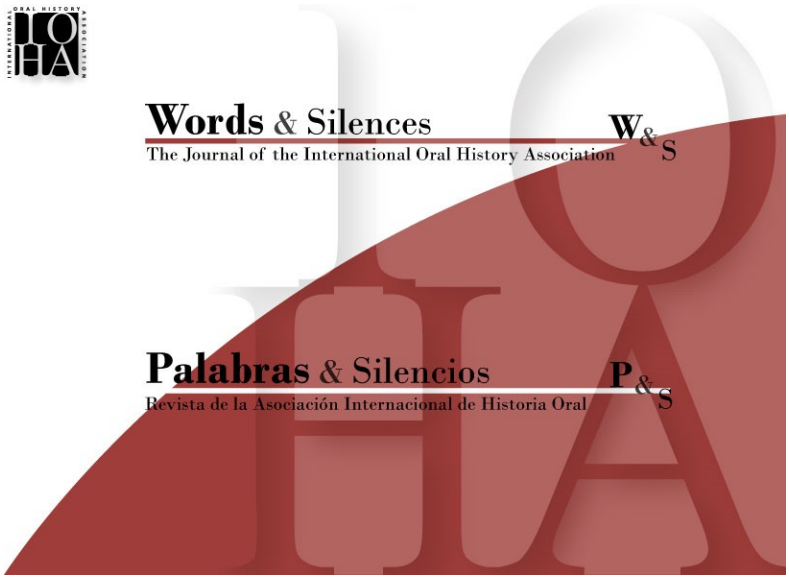

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What in the World? A Status Report on Oral History

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Powerful motivations compel oral history projects during times of social and political upheaval. A national archive will usually be that of the old regime, requiring alternative views to be sought. Leaders of the revolution may still be available for interviewing. Scholars will feel a compelling need to record and preserve the memories and opinions of those who experienced tumultuous and consequential events, whether as principals or as observers. All of those factors were evident when the IOHA convened in Prague in 2010. Not only in the Czech Republic but throughout Central and Eastern Europe oral historians have recorded the collapse of Soviet bloc and the remaking of their societies. Epitomizing those projects, program chair Miroslav Vaněk interviewed both the winners and the losers of the Velvet Revolution.

Czech oral historians have made the Communist era a top priority for research. Their new-found freedom after the revolution opened fresh developments in historical research questions and approaches. While they encountered skepticism from their more traditional colleagues (some of whom had supported the old regime as well as the old methods), they studied Western European and American oral history theory and methods. In the 1990s they began interviewing those who had been involved in the popular uprisings known as the Velvet Revolution. But having emerged from a one-sided history, they were determined not to replace it with another one-sided approach. They interviewed former Communists functionaries as well as dissidents and opposition activists and average citizens. The results were often quite unexpected. As Vaněk noted, "Our interviews have confronted us with the fact that the great events of history do not form the main axis of individual life for the majority of our population."[1]

The location of the 2010 meeting in Prague drew strong regional representation from oral historians from Ukraine, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Albania. Representatives of these countries delivered papers that deal with the common themes with which they were grappling, from political and social revolutions to resistance, trauma, bereavement, deportation and repopulation, industrial development and environmental impact. The subject matter of specific oral history projects is usually rooted in the nation or region where they are conducted, but the methods employed are universal, allowing oral historians from every area of the world to share common interests and learn from each other's best practices.

Beyond political and social revolutions, sessions at the conference made clear that oral historians have also been profoundly affected by the digital electronic revolution that has forced a reconsideration of the ways in which oral history interviews are conducted, preserved, and publicly presented. Compact, easy to operate, and

1 See http://iohanet.org/

affordable, digital audio and video recorders provide better sound quality recordings, and converting analog tapes to digital also offers oral historians the opportunity to remove or reduce background noises on their older recordings. Perhaps the greatest advantage of digital recordings is their ability to be shared electronically via the Internet. Oral historians can communicate via email and put entire transcripts and audio files online. This has expanded research use of interviews far beyond what was previously possible. Websites enable projects to reach new audiences of teachers and students, genealogists, local historians, and casual web browsers. Providing sound along with transcripts poses new problems for those projects that permitted interviewees to edit their transcripts. What should the oral historian do if the transcript was heavily revised and did not match the recording? Should the entire sound recording be made available if the interviewee deleted portions in the transcript? Some projects have steered around this problem by positing only audio excerpts rather than the entire interview.

Electronic communications have fostered a broader international perspective of oral history. On each continent, national oral history organizations have developed, often in connection with the International Oral History Association's meeting in that region. Before the IOHA was formally established, ad hoc international meetings had been held in Western Europe. Beginning with the adoption of its constitution in 1996, the IOHA determined to shift its meetings around the world, from Sweden, to Brazil, Turkey, South Africa, Italy, Australia, Mexico, and the Czech Republic. Those who attend these international conferences gained insights into vastly different types of projects, usually rooted in the most pressing issues in their home countries, but also found that no matter what location, oral historians employed a common methodology and encountered similar problems. At formal sessions and informal discussions, practitioners shared mutual experiences that bridged their different cultural circumstances.

Oral history practitioners come from many disciplines as well as many nations. Historians, sociologists, anthropologists, linguists, documentary film makers, educators, and community-based individuals share similarities in methodology, but also learn from each other's different approaches. Similarly, while oral historians focus on issues and events specific to their home countries, they share the same concerns over interviewing equipment, processing and archiving that creates a global network. Oral historians have become more global. For his latest book, *They Say in Harlan Country: An Oral History*, the Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli spent twenty-five years studying the mining communities of Harlan County, Kentucky, in the United States. Drawn the area to study class struggle, he found Harlan more complex and contradictory than he anticipated, which only increased his desire to learn more about it. He conducted scores of interviews but worried that people might begrudge him as an outsider. Instead, one of his interviewees assured him that it made a lot of difference that he wasn't someone from New York or Chicago or some other American city that might treat them with condescension, but that he came from outside the United States. "All you're doing is trying to gather a little knowledge or get people to tell you stories, and they don't resent that."[2]

Around the world, more teachers have embraced oral history to promote "active learning." One creative projected paired a secondary school teacher with the administrator of a senior citizens center. They jointly created a project that brought adolescent students together with elderly retirees to produce both oral histories and a creative drama drawn from the interviews. Students studying the Great Depression and Second World War II, interviewed those who had lived through that era. The experience taught the students about the complexity of history, and made them appreciate multiple perspectives on the same events. The oral history testimony provided depth to the issues they were studying, and

2 .Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4-7.

also gave the students a chance to spend rare "quality time" with elders. For their part, the senior citizens appreciated their interaction with the students, felt pleased to be able to share their memories of the past with them, and enjoyed watching the short dramatic sketches that the students produced from their interviews. The teacher reported that the students wrote about their interviews "with passion and excitement–and deep personal conviction."[3]

At universities, scholars from multiple disciplines have focused on memory studies. Their studies have examined autobiographical memory (unique to a particular individual), collective memory (the historical consciousness of a group) and public memory (the ways in which communities remember and commemorate the past). Memory studies tend to concentrate on the how facts are remembered, and distorted, rather than on the substance of the information they contain. Oral historians, by contrast, generally rely on oral testimony to reconstruct and understand the past. But since oral historians specialize in long-term memory, they inevitably confront the "memory paradox" that even the most durable memories are influenced by the social processes of storytelling. Alistair Thompson has suggested, pragmatically, a "double-take" approach to memory, "to use it to explore both the past (history) and the past of the present (memory). . . . As historians we need to interrogate our interview sources critically, as we do any historical source, and to understand the ways in which memory stories have been shaped by the particular circumstances of the event and the complex processes of remembering."[4]

Oral historians have also tapped into the research being conducted in gerontology, since people tend to give more reflective interviews in old age rather than a mid-career. Gerontologists have described this phenomenon as "life review," a process by which as people grow older they naturally review their past and measure their successes and disappointments. Long forgotten earlier memories return and grow more vivid. For some people, life review causes depression and despair. For others it results in candor and serenity. Interviews with older people can therefore produce rich results in the amount of information uncovered, but it can have a therapeutic effect, allowing older people to express what they have been thinking, and providing some validation because someone was willing to listen to and record their stories for posterity. Oral historians are not therapists, but therapists in nursing homes and hospitals have employed oral history as part of "reminiscence theory." as a form of intervention with those troubled by their memories.[5]

Although individual interviews tap individual memory, projects have been centered around collective experiences, focusing on a particular business, military unit, school, or community. The aggregate of the individual interviews reflect the collective memory of a group, and in some cases record the way a community has coped with a difficult past. Oral historians have discovered that whole communities have collectively reorganized the past to make more sense of it., unconsciously shifting traumatic events from one incident to another to better fit their self image. They have concluded from such phenomena that oral history can be valuable for more than the "objective' facts that it acquires. Its "subjective" quality can be equally valuable, by showing what people remember incorrectly, and why.[6] Public historians, working on public exhibits and memorials, have also encountered cases of mass amnesia, where a community has wiped out of its collective memory an unpleasant incident from the past, and fiercely resists acknowledging that event.

3 Jane McDowell and Monica Gorman, "Combining Intergenerational Interviews with Creative Drama in U.S. History," *Perspectives on History: The Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, 48 (November 2010), 43-44.

4 Alistair Thomson, "Memory and Remembering in Oral History," in Ritchie, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, 90-91.

5 Joanna Bornat, "Remembering in Later Life: Generating Individual and Social Change," in . Ritchie, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, 202-18.

6 Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories; Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

These multiple approaches to memory have combined in sharpening the focus of oral history projects on traumatic events. For years, oral historians have recorded stories of earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, and other natural disasters long after those events occurred. More recently, oral history projects have been recording the immediate past, soon after a traumatic event occurs. These projects have broadened the scope of voices of history, provided a catharsis for the victims, and enabled interviewers to test what people remember and how those memories might change over time. Columbia University instituted an oral history of New Yorkers' reactions to the attacks on September 11, 2001. Conceived a week after the event, the project interviewed 400 people during its first year, and then re-interviewed half of them eighteen months later to examine how they coped with their emotions over that period, and how that affected their reflections on that experience.[7] When Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast of the United States in 2005, a number of projects quickly began interviewing survivors, many of whom were refugees far from their flooded homes. Interviewing soon after such a traumatic event has generated extensive discussions about the issues of historical distance, objectivity, reflection, and emotional trauma.

Funding for this proliferation of oral history projects has come from varied sources, from universities to private contributors and government agencies. In 1994, Great Britain created a Heritage Lottery Fund, to distributed money raised by the national lottery to fund heritage projects. It has been given revenue grants to 2,600 projects that used oral history.[8] In the United States, the Library of Congress has solicited citizens to conduct oral histories with war veterans, and thousands have responded. A private corporation, StoryCorps, set up booths in New York's Grand Central Station and invited people to record their own brief interviews, which are also deposited in the Library of Congress. Whether done by professionals or amateurs, oral historians have insisted that all interviewers respect the dignity and autonomy of those being interviewed, and use appropriate legal releases to determine how the interviews can be archived, researched and published.

The diversity, creativity, and popularity of oral history have come to the attention of book publishers. The number of oral history manuals, handbooks, and monographs has multiplied, and several publishers have launched oral history series. From 1990 to 2000, the Twayne oral history series produced twenty-six volumes dealt with everything from World War II combat soldiers to women coal miners. Other series have emerged since then, notably the Palgrave studies in oral history, the theories and methods volumes from Routledge, and the Oxford oral history series. The recent *Oxford Handbook on Oral History* included forty authors from five continents. Most of its contributors have participated in meetings of the International Oral History Association, and their articles reflect the diversity of oral history subjects and concerns, and the commonality of the methodology.

So what in the world is going on with oral history? Technology has been changing dramatically and speedily, new debates have developed over methods and theory, and practitioners have become more adept in presenting and disseminating the oral histories they produced. What have not changed are the basic interview techniques. Interviewers need to prepare themselves thoroughly, know how to use their equipment, treat interviewees with respect, establish rapport, ask meaningful questions, listen carefully, follow up with further questions in response to the interviewees' answers, and oversee the final treatment of the interview, whether transcribed or preserved in audio form. At its core, oral history depends on the human relations between the interviewer and interviewee. It rests on mutual trust and a desire to capture and preserve memories of the past. If done correctly, the in-

7 Mary Marshall Clark, "Case Study: Field Notes on Catastrophe: Reflections on the September 11, 2001, *Oral History Memory and Narrative Project,"* in Ritchie, ed., *The* Oxford Handbook on Oral History, 255-64.

8 Jo Reilly, "Oral History, Learning and the Heritage Lottery Fund: Tips for a Good Application." *Oral History*, 38 (Autumn 2010), 102-5.

terviews can be candid and revealing. They can add depth and context to the more formal records of history. They can preserve stories that would otherwise have been lost to history. As a technologically driven-methodology, oral history has constantly undergone transformation, but the interview process itself has remained consistent.

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