

Conference Report: 16th International Oral History Conference, Prague, Czech Republic, 7-11 July 2010

Alexander Freund, University of Winnipeg

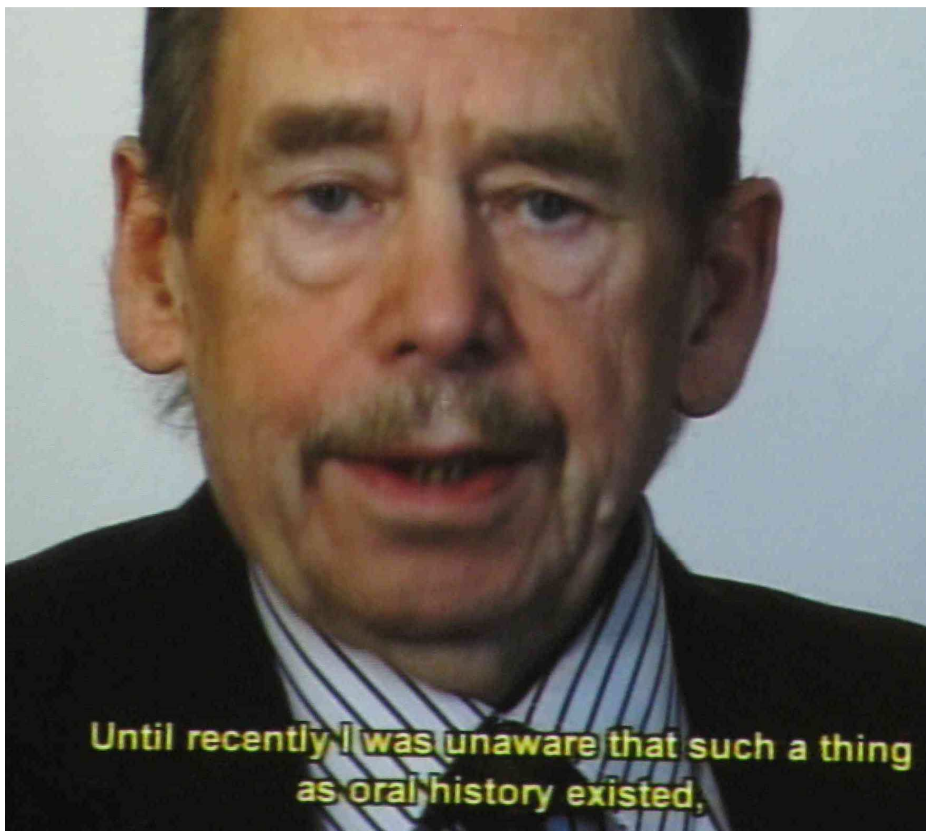
The International Oral History Association held its 16th biennial meeting in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, in July 2010. Under the umbrella theme “Between Past and Future: Oral History, Memory and Meaning,” some 500 oral historians from over fifty countries and all continents presented their research on the campus of the University of Economics. The presenters addressed the conference’s sub-themes, including memories of violence, war and totalitarianism; memory and politics; islands of freedom; memories of family; the world of work; gender/ing memories and the making of sexual identities; health and healthcare; ecology and disasters; sharing/passing on beliefs; organizing oral history; methodological, archival, and technological issues; teaching oral history; and oral history and the media. The meeting was preceded by one day of Master Classes – intensive workshops with leaders in the field – about oral history and education, subjectivity, evidence, trauma, memory, and the life-story interview.



Opening Ceremony at the Karolinum, Charles University (photo: A. Freund)

This was the first time the bilingual Spanish-English IOHA held its meeting in a country east of the “Iron Curtain,” as German oral historian Alexander von Plato pointed out in his keynote address at the opening ceremony. Von Plato, who has led a European-wide oral history project on Nazi slave workers, surveyed the development of oral history in Central and Eastern Europe since 1989. Early hopes for an oral history boom were not always fulfilled. Most oral history work focused on experiences during the Second World War and the Nazi occupation, much less on experiences during the Soviet period or the time since 1989. The Czech Oral History Association and several of its projects, and more recently the Ukrainian Oral History Association, are models, von Plato said, because they have developed projects that investigated people’s Soviet and post-Soviet experiences.

“Until recently I was unaware that such a thing as oral history existed,” Vaclav Havel said in a video address to the conference, “but when I first encountered the phenomenon a few years ago, I realised its significance.” The



Vaclav Havel addresses IOHA members (photo: A. Freund)

acclaimed author, former president of the Czech Republic, and Nobel Prize Winner emphasized: “Without oral history, many things would undoubtedly remain forgotten for good.”



IOHA General Meeting (photo: A. Freund)

IOHA members at the General Meeting elected Miroslav Vanek (Czech Republic) as IOHA’s new president. He succeeds Pilar Dominguez (Spain), who continues to serve on Council as past president. The general membership also elected Miren Llona (Spain) and Juan Jose Gutierrez (USA) as vice presidents, and nine council members representing all regions of the world: Indira Chowdury (Asia); Petros Aklilu (Africa); Christopher Paetzold and Michelle Wisslow (Europe); Todd Moye and Xavier Aguirre Palacios (North America); Helen Klæbe (Oceania); Lilina Barela and Joana Maria Pedro (South America). The Council will continue to support the improvement of the website, www.iohanet.org, and the publication of its journal, *Words and Silences*, as well as its newsletter. Almut Leh (Germany), long-time secretary and treasurer of IOHA, reported that as of July 2010, the association had 185 members.

Liliana G. Barela (Argentina) gave a brief presentation of the state-of-the-art and significance of oral history in Argentina and presented a proposal to hold the next international oral history conference in Buenos Aires in 2012. This was accepted by the general membership.



Screenshot from the Buenos Aires video (photo: A. Freund)

A dozen special interest groups met in Prague, including the national oral history associations. Representatives from Australia, Canada, South Africa, the United States, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, Germany, Ireland, Spain, Italy, Portugal, Brazil, Argentina, Greece, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Japan attended. Other countries with associations, such as Singapore, Austria, and New



Representatives of national oral history associations discuss how to best start a new association (photo: A. Freund)

Zealand, were not represented. Representatives from the Irish OHA, which had formed just two weeks prior to the meeting, reported on their progress and their start-up problems. The geographical span of associations shows that oral history is not just a method, but a movement.

As at past meetings, presenters at the conference demonstrated a variety of approaches to and understandings of oral history and covered a wide range of themes. Twenty-five of the 108 panels focused on memories of war, twelve on migrations, eleven on organizing oral history, and eight on memory and politics. The focus on memories of state violence under dictatorial regimes as well as the discussion of how to organize research and researchers is evidence of the pressing issues in Central and Eastern European countries as well as South America, where “getting the word out,” having the voices heard, and presenting testimonies is of utmost importance. The underrepresentation of oral historians from Asia (17) and Africa (twelve, ten of whom were from South Africa) shows that some regions have a long road ahead of them in establishing oral history. Most presenters came from Europe (including 37 from the Czech Republic, 35 from the United Kingdom, and 29 from Spain) and the Americas (including 67 from the United States, 54 from Brazil, and 29 from Mexico). As at past IOHA meetings, Canada (three) was underrepresented.

The following impressions are based on a small number of the over 430 presentations presented over four days (three of the nine concurrent sessions had simultaneous English-Spanish translation). As a migration historian, I attended several panels as well as individual presentations on migration, including presentations on Galician immigrants in Baracaldo (Spain), Mexican braceros and internal labour migrants, English prosperity migrants in Australia, child refugees from the Spanish Civil War in the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom, recent Albanian migrants in Greece, Polish and German deportees during and after the Second World War, Moluccan Dutch migrants in the Netherlands since 1951, and multicultural and transnational families in Bulgaria since 1990. Memory served as a major concept in many of the papers. Goiuria Aramdendi and colleagues (Spain) found that poor Galician migrants had “happy memories” despite experiences of oppression. They argued that their role as oral historians was to be objective and preserve memories. Riki Van Boeschoten (Greece) explored the role of memory in the integration of Albanians in Greece. Piotr Filipkowski and Anna Wylegala (both Poland) noted in their presentation on Polish and German memories of the deportation of German inhabitants of a small German town that became Polish in 1945 that memories are always constructed in specific contexts, but tell us as much about the past as about the present.

Under the theme of memories of violence, war, and totalitarianism, oral historians presented many case studies. Selma Leydesdorff (Netherlands), whose research has focused on Holocaust survivors, interviewed survivors of the Srebrenica massacre – the 1995 murder of some 8,000 Muslim Bosniak men committed by Bosnian Serb troops and under the eyes of Dutch United Nations peacekeepers. Making life stories, Leydesdorff said, was important in helping the women talk about their traumatic experiences. Catherine Baker (United Kingdom)

explored how peacekeepers - both soldiers and translators – used language to distance themselves from others and thus also from their experiences. Nancy Beatriz Nicholls Lopeandia (Chile) interviewed Chileans about their childhood memories of the military dictatorship (1973-1990). Not knowing or understanding what was happening at the time, but seeing the corpses of their teachers lying in the streets and other signs of violence instilled a deep fear in that generation. This fear constituted a fundamental break in the development of Chilean society. Institutionalization in Franco-Spain, Angela Cenarro (Spain) explained, similarly left deep scars on children’s minds and bodies. Pilar Riano-Alcala (Canada), using the case of a massacre in a village in Columbia, emphasized the importance of local memories in nations’ attempts to commemorate violent conflicts.



Pilar Riano-Alcala from the University of British Columbia (photo: A. Freund)

Unlike previous meetings, there was much less talk about the use and possibilities of digital technologies – an indication, it seems to me, that much of the hype has calmed down; oral historians now commonly use digital recorders, explore digital means of disseminating their research, and reflect on these practices as part of their work. This is a trend that had already begun at the last meeting in Mexico.

Several oral historians explored “new directions in oral history” (the panel title) using both audio and video technologies, but also asking us to explore all of our and our narrators’ senses. Sean Field (South Africa) argued that video technology was useful for exploring the construction of racialized spaces. His team interviewed 300 people along three main streets in Cape Town, thoroughfares that were built under Apartheid to segregate blacks and whites. Paula Hamilton (Australia) urged historians to pay attention to all of our senses. Anna Green (UK) explored the connections between oral history and the history of emotions. Linda Shopes (USA) commented that these are attempts to get beyond the word in oral history. At another panel, Jeff Friedman (USA) made the

same case for embodied memory and need to give interviewees space to express their memories through their bodies.

Oral historians also looked back to take stock and see where we are headed as a movement. Young scholars from Germany and Italy interviewed the founders of IOHA. Senior scholars wondered whether oral history had “lost its radical edge.” This panel originated in Sean Field’s post to IOHA’s discussion



Paul Thompson says good-bye at the closing ceremony (photo: A. Freund)

forum (<http://www.iohanet.org/debate>) asking whether oral history had become “respectable.” Alessandro Portelli (Italy) and Sherna Berger Gluck (USA) agreed that oral history was changing, but much of its quest to radically change history had not lost its urgency.

At the closing ceremony, Selma Leydesdorff paid homage to Paul Thompson (UK), who has profoundly shaped oral history, not only through his book *The Voice of the Past* and his pioneering IOHA work, but also by mentoring many students and colleagues. This was his last international oral history conference. “When we started oral history in Great Britain in the late 1960s,” he said, “it was like a candle in the dark.”

Except for a CD with papers submitted before the conference, there are no conference proceedings. A few of the papers may, however, be published in *Words and Silences*, the journal of the International Oral History Association, and in *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale*. Overall, the conference in Prague demonstrated the vibrancy of oral history in many regions of the world and the continued need for oral history as a social movement that democratizes history by documenting people’s experiences and offering historical interpretation. It is a meeting from which Canadian oral historians would benefit

greatly, not only because of many shared interests, but also because the meeting serves as a forum for international debates about global issues. There is also a lot

that Canadian oral historians can contribute to the oral history movement, including their vast expertise in indigenous oral history and oral tradition. It is to be hoped that more oral historians from Canada will participate in the meeting in Buenos Aires in 2012.