

## Conference Report: 15<sup>th</sup> International Oral History Conference, Guadalajara, Mexico, 23-26 September 2008

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The International Oral History Association held its 15<sup>th</sup> biennial meeting in Mexico's second largest city, Guadalajara, in September 2008. Under the umbrella theme of "Oral History - A Dialogue With Our Times," some 400 oral historians from all continents presented their research on the campus of Guadalajara University's Centre of the Social Sciences and Humanities. The presenters addressed the conference's sub-themes, including memory spaces, migration, gender, work, memory and politics, family and generations, body memories, teaching oral history, memories of war and violence, oral narratives, health, ecology and disasters, archiving memories, methodology and theory, time, visual images, and oral tradition.



Mural del Hombre de Fuego by José Clemente Orozco, Guadalajara Cultural Centre (photo: A. Freund)

This was the first time the bilingual Spanish-English IOHA held its meeting in a Spanish-speaking country. The majority of the 230 Spanish and 170 English presentations were simultaneously translated. Eugenia Meyer, founder of one of Mexico's major oral history archives, delivered the keynote address, in which she recounted how oral history had changed her life and emphasized the importance of remembering the past through oral history.

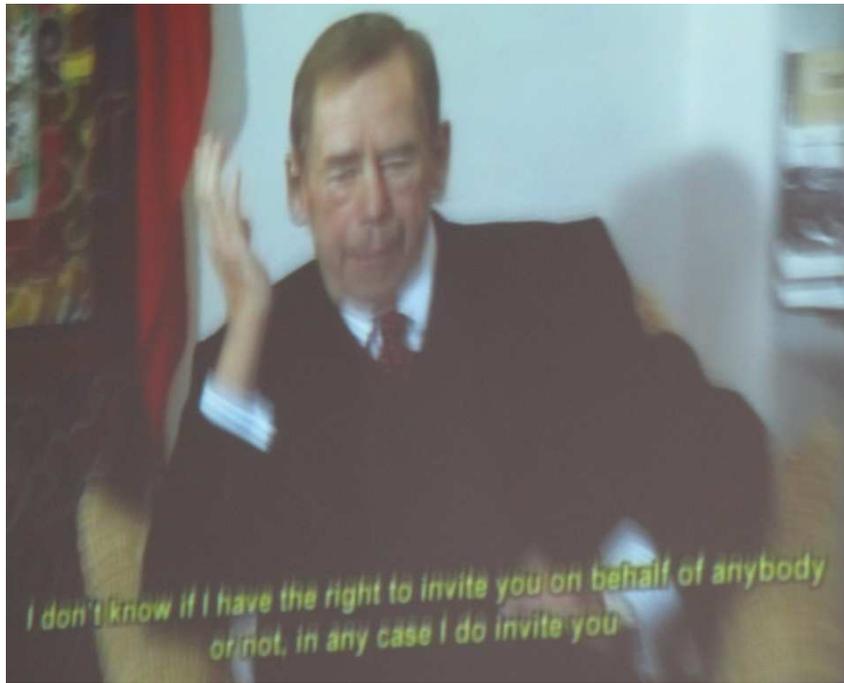


Opening panel and  
keynote address  
(photo: A. Freund)

Alicia Olivera de Bonfil, another pioneer of oral history in Mexico, was honoured at the end of the conference. The meeting was preceded by two days of Master Classes – intensive workshops with leaders in the field – about memory and trauma, video in oral history, and editing oral history for publication. Participants were also able to enjoy a show by Guadalajara University's Folkloric Ballet at the Teatro Degollado in the city's historic centre and a lively fiesta in the nearby town of Zappopan.

IOHA members at the General Meeting accepted the IOHA Council's proposal to moderately increase membership rates and introduce a lifetime membership. The outgoing Council also presented IOHA's new website ([www.iohanet.org](http://www.iohanet.org)). The general membership then elected Pilar Dominguez from Spain as its new president. She succeeds Alistair Thomson from Australia, who had not sought reelection, but continues to serve on Council as past president. Together, they will guide the incoming Council in organizing the next IOHA conference, which will be held in the Czech Republic's capital of Prague in June

2010. In a video presentation, Vaclav Havel, acclaimed author, former president of the Czech Republic and Nobel Prize Winner, extended the invitation to IOHA.



In a video address, Vaclav Havel invites - in his own humble way - oral historians from around the world to gather in Prague in 2010 (photo: A. Freund)

As in the past, presenters at the conference demonstrated a variety of approaches to and understandings of oral history, and the following impressions are based on only a small number of presentations. Among the presentations I attended, one dominant approach was that of documenting the experiences of marginalized and oppressed people through oral history interviews, photographs, and video. Albert Lichtblau from Austria argued in his work on Black migrants in Austria that oral history helps counter clichés created by mainstream media. Martha Beatriz Cahuich Campos from Mexico documented the negative impact of industrialization and ecological disaster on the people of Ciudad Juarez, a large city bordering Texas, and their attempts to help themselves through creating an NGO. Eileen Mary Guillory from the United States documented the experiences of elderly New Orleans residents during and after Hurricane Katrina devastated the city in 2005. She also explored the question of how long after a disaster oral historians should wait to begin the interviewing, especially if the survivors are old and frail.

Several presenters focused on methodological discussions of interviewing and archiving processes. A discussion of digital media for recording, archiving

and dissemination, which had been predominant themes at the meetings in Rome, Italy (2004) and Sydney, Australia (2006), was absent from Guadalajara. Nevertheless, a great number of presenters used photographs, video, and other audio-visual material in their presentations. Further, a great number of presentations showed an extensive use of other sources, especially material objects, in combination with oral history interviews. Janis Wilton from Australia explored the online exhibition “Belongings,” which focused on immigrants’ material belongings and the stories they told about them. By tracing how the exhibition curators edited the extensive interviews down to the short excerpts available to online visitors, she also showed how curators themselves created another story about these objects. Raymundo Padilla Lozoya from Mexico identified 23 kinds of material objects that survived or were created after a landslide had destroyed much of the town on Minatitlan on 27 October 1959. These “vehicles of memory” - church ruins, family photographs, oral traditions, a street named Calle 27 de octubre - helped the town people build a greater sense of collective memory over the past half century. Alistair Thomson from Australia interviewed British immigrants about their family photographs to explore the careful construction of their experiences vis-à-vis relatives in the United Kingdom and to consider the relationship between oral history and photographs.



Conference participants outside the main auditorium (photo: A. Freund)

Several archivists, especially from the United States, presented parts of their collections. Irene Reti of the Regional Oral History Office at the University of California, Santa Cruz showcased a number of interviews with pioneers of the sustainable agriculture movement while David Marshall from the Southwest Collection of Texas Tech University described interviews conducted since the 1950s about the Hispanic experience in Texas. At Dickinson College in Pennsylvania and the Universidad Nacional de la Patagonia, researchers have

created a virtual museum of 4,000 videotaped oral histories, photographs, and archival documents about the people of Comodora Rivadavia in Patagonia, Argentina. Increasingly, such collections and archives are digitizing their collections to make them more accessible.

Other presenters problematized oral history as a source by investigating how narrators constructed their stories and how the interviewers participated in the production of such “texts.” Roseli Boschilia from Brasil used Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus to explore how narratives and narrative patterns were passed on from one generation to the next through the use of collective symbols. Analyzing interviews with post-World War Two immigrants in southern Brazil, she found that succeeding generations told the story of their parents’ and grandparents’ immigration in new ways that helped them construct their identity. Meltem Karadag from Turkey used Bourdieu’s claim that “life stories can be read as pure fiction” to reconsider the concepts of subjectivity and objectivity in oral history. Marta Kurkowska-Budzan from Poland interviewed Polish WWII-veterans who after 1945 fought the new communist regime. She asked both about their fates after their fight ended in 1947 and how they constructed their life stories in the current political situation. Karin Stoegner from Austria used Walter Benjamin’s work and interviews with Mauthausen concentration camp survivors to revisit questions about the dialectical relationship between the past and the present in oral history.



Marta Kurkowska-Budzan  
(top right) presents her  
research  
(photo: A. Freund)

Despite the large number of Latin American presentations and simultaneous translations, it was difficult for the non-Spanish speaker to get a sense of the state of the art of oral history in this region of the world. Furthermore, almost all papers on the topic of teaching oral history were in Spanish and not

translated. While the great number of presentations from Latin America showed that oral history in that region covers a great diversity of topics, is theoretically engaged, and uses all digital media, overarching panels addressing the past and present of Latin American oral history would have helped to open and strengthen the dialogue. It is to be hoped that in Prague such panels will be organized in order to give international oral historians a better understanding of oral history in Central and Eastern Europe. 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. Overall, the conference in Guadalajara was a successful, intellectually stimulating, and truly international meeting.