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# Report on the conference of the International Oral History Association in Rio de Janeiro *Oral History in the Audio and Digital World* (23–29.07.2023)

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The 2023 International Oral History Association (IOHA) conference in Rio de Janeiro holds a special significance for Polish researchers for two reasons.[1] Firstly, the forthcoming 2025 conference is scheduled to be held in Kraków with the theme *Rethinking Oral History* proposed by the Polish Oral History Society. This theme focuses on the role of oral history during times of crisis, such as pandemics, economic downturns, and conflicts, e.g. the war in Ukraine. What is the role of researchers? What should their involvement and stance towards those in power be? The present era demands a fresh approach to conducting oral history. The promotional film for the 2025 conference highlighted that oral history is not solely an academic subject, but also involves the imperative and practice of providing a voice to those who may be excluded from official discourse for myriad reasons. The proposal from Poland was chosen unanimously at the conference, and the idea was met with great enthusiasm. Secondly, the conference also included the election of a new IOHA president and board of directors, with Jakub Gałęziowski, the president of the Polish Oral History Association, joining as a new member.

The conference in Brazil was significant due to South America's place and position in the global oral history landscape. The IOHA operates in English and Spanish, two languages featured in the conference and association proceedings. Panels operated in bilingual mode; a practice consistently adopted at all IOHA congresses. At this point, it is noteworthy that Brazil has hosted two IOHA conferences, with the first being held in 1998.

Oral history in Latin America, including Brazil, is intertwined with political processes such as the rise of dictatorships, including military dictatorships, processes of democratisation, and documenting repression. Brazil, a country of nearly 215 million people, has several oral history research centres (including FGV, described below). Additionally, Brazil's oral history archives have a robust tradition. What is important from the Brazilian perspective is not only the recognition of traditions associated with documentary and oral history projects, but also a rejection of the colonisation of oral history by Western countries. In his 1999 text, José Carlos Sebe Bom Meihy, a co-founder of the Brazilian Oral History Association, posed the questions: "Is our Oral History simply an echo of First World oral history? Do we not have a specific responsibility and commitment to our own social environment?".[2] These two questions reflect the strong sense of subjectivity among

1 A detailed conference programme and profiles of the individual organisers are available on the event website: https://eventos.fgv.br/en/22nd-ioha-international-conference (accessed: 27.09.2023).

2 J.C. Sebe Bom Meihy, *Oral History in Brazil: Development and Challenges*, 'The Oral History Review,' vol. 26, no. 2, 1999, pp. 127–36.

Brazilian researchers. For decades, it was common for Brazilian social scientists to use oral interviews as a source of research information and document production through the relationship between a witness to history and a researcher.[3]

The main organiser of the conference was the Fundação Getulio Vargas (Gertulio Vargas Foundation, FGV), named after the former president of Brazil. It is a private foundation and think-tank operating like a private university, offering undergraduate diplomas and PhD courses. Brazil's first systematic experiences in the field of oral history date to 1975, when Mexican and US specialists offered courses at Rio de Janeiro's Fundação Getulio Vargas.[4] Part of the foundation is the Centro de Pesquisa e Documentação de História Contemporânea do Brasil (Contemporary Brazilian History Research and Documentation Centre, CPDOC), which is a non-public research institute. The oral history collection housed at CPDOC holds more than 2,400 interviews, corresponding to around 7,600 hours of recordings, divided into 150 different projects developed by CPDOC researchers. Their projects and interviews cover topics such as political elites, culture, sport, the dictatorship, foreign policy, documentary cinema, and the memory of social sciences.[5]

The conference centred around the theme of digitising oral history, utilising novel data collection and analytical techniques, as well as engaging with digital platforms of varying kinds. One of the speakers at the plenary exemplified this connection through the relation of a story of how a fragment of a recording from a victim of ethnic cleansing in South Africa gained widespread traction online, in which the subject can be heard uttering the phrase, "I will never forgive you." This video has amassed thousands of views on YouTube and has become a symbol. Meanwhile, the woman's personal views have shifted, but she holds no sway over the reception of her public statements. This prompts consideration of responsibility for the processing and sharing of digital data, including within museums and institutions.

The keynote address to the conference was notable. Typically, keynote speeches are allocated to renowned researchers and serve as the starting point of the conference. However, at the IOHA conference in Rio de Janeiro, the concept of a conference kick-off was unique. The conference began with a roundtable discussion featuring young researchers (PhD students) and community historians who specialised in not only academic oral history but also in digital and audiovisual mediums. The title of the debate, *Oral History in a Digital and Audiovisual World*, aligned with the conference theme. Speakers included: Elizabeth Visser (PhD student in the Historical Studies Department at the University of Cape Town), Jun Oguro (a Professor specialising in journalism studies at Doshisha University, Kyoto, Japan, teaching News Writing

3 M.M. Ferreira, *Oral History in Brazil: an Assessment*, Rio de Janeiro 2004, https://bibliotecadigital.fgv.br/dspace/bitstream/handle/10438/6832/1413.pdf (accessed 14.09.2023).

4 https://portal.fgv.br/en (accessed: 10.09.2023).

5 https://cpdoc.fgv.br/ (accessed: 10.09.2023).

and Editing), and Sumallya Mukhopadhyay (who teaches English Literature at the School of Media Studies and Humanities, Manav Rachna International Institute of Research and Studies and researches the politics of dispossession in narratives related to the 1947 Partition of Bengal) participated in a meeting chaired by Mayra Jucá (PhD student at CPDOC).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge the potential for mutual learning between Polish and Brazilian researchers. Both nations are currently exploring the field of oral history as it pertains to political repression in totalitarian regimes. Brazil was a military dictatorship since 1975 until 1988. The country also has a history of being a Portuguese colony until 1887. The memory of slavery and abolitionism, as well as the place of ethnically and racially diverse groups in society, are also important subjects of study. Furthermore, the road to democratisation and its critical assessment are significant topics to explore. This presents another opportunity for Brazilian researchers to share knowledge and practices. From an objective standpoint, the experience of documenting and accounting for crises in Brazil and South America is noteworthy. It is worth examining the projects and oral history research being developed in this region not solely based on geographical distance, but also based on the potential for interesting themes to facilitate knowledge exchange.