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## Conference report on the 23rd International Oral History Association Conference *Re-Thinking Oral History*, 16–19 September 2025, Krakow

The 23rd International Oral History Association Conference, the latest edition of the most important periodical meeting of oral historians in the world, took place in Krakow in Poland between 16 and 19 September 2025. This year's title, *Re-thinking Oral History*, outlined the clear aim of taking stock of the evolution of oral history, especially in the post-COVID-19 period and in the context of the emergence of new technologies, and Artificial Intelligence. It mainly focused on the challenges posed by humanitarian crises, wars, and climate change, considering the role of this discipline in society. The organizers' aim was to reconsider the idea and practice of oral history, through awareness of the role that conducting interviews has on a person and on the wider community, while also considering the formation of memory for future generations. It also called upon oral historians to reflect on their role towards society in a period of democratic regression and on their possible contribution in enhancing dialogue and deliberation. Indeed, oral history is a fundamental approach which can help train us in respectful confrontation and how to accept different positions and memories, in a world that is becoming more divided and intolerant.

As a member of the Centre for Oral History of the IRRIS Institute and part of Working Group 2 Culture, Cognition and Narratives of Legitimization of COST Action CHANGE-CODE – *Research Network for Interdisciplinary Studies of Transhistorical Deliberative Democracy*,<sup>1</sup> I embraced the occasion as a chance to participate in a global event, together with almost 400 researchers from 55 countries, exploring the deliberative power of oral history in contemporary society. The conference counted a total of 63 sessions, covering a wide range of topics and problems.

### CONTINUITIES AND DISCONTINUITIES

Oral history developed after the Second World War in the US and later spread in Western Europe, where it emerged as a specific approach in the 1970s, carrying certain political connotations, especially the idea of hearing the voices of previously excluded people (Contini & Martini, 1993, 99–100). Since the 1980s, oral history has spread throughout Eastern Europe, especially after the fall of the socialist regimes at the start of the 1990s, allowing contrasting narratives to emerge. In the past thirty years, Latin America has become the perfect soil for the development of the *historia reciente* that aims to analyse the elaboration of traumatic memories in the transition from dictatorships to democracy (Casellato, 2021, 12–15).

At this year's conference, the wide-ranging geographical provenance of the speakers reflected the rooting of oral history in various continents, with the anglophone world

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1 This report is a result of the Young Researchers and Innovators (YRI) Conference grant within the COST Action CA22149 *Research Network for Interdisciplinary Studies of Transhistorical Deliberative Democracy* (CHANGE-CODE) supported by COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology).

the most widely present, especially the US with its oral history stronghold, Columbia University, where the first centre for oral history was founded in 1948 by Allan Nevins. Other groups came from the UK and South American countries, places where oral history particularly flourishes, but a consistent number of researchers from Eastern Europe also registered (perhaps in part because of the conference location), together with smaller groups from Western Europe, Central Africa, the Far East, and Oceania.

The conference demonstrated the ability to innovate in oral history, which is experiencing an expansion in investigated periods and areas, but also in terms of its connection to its roots. An interesting mixture of traditional themes, regarding the memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust, on which oral history was initially consolidated, met with stimuli of the present, like the Israeli-Palestinian and Russian-Ukrainian conflicts, climate change, post-memory, and ethics, as well as technical issues connected to transcription, archiving, and the re-use of oral sources.

The conference also showed continuity with the original aim of European oral history, the valorisation of marginalized voices. In her keynote lecture, Mary Marshall Clark, director of the Columbia University Centre for Oral History Research (US), traced the development of the main oral history reflections from the teachings of Luisa Passerini, Alessandro Portelli, and Michael Frisch, who are considered the pioneers of this discipline, and who – she noted – still talk about the same things they discussed at the beginning of their studies in the 1970s and 1980s. Therefore, as she observed, ‘nothing has changed, yet everything has changed’. Marshall Clark reiterated the importance of remembering the lessons of these great anticipators, that are still innovative even after all these years: the value of listening, the dialogue, the importance of the environment in which the interview took place, which must be conveyed in the final product, and the imagination needed to give sense to what we hear. These fundamental teachings that young researchers could engage with in the opening workshops held by Alessandro Portelli, former professor at the University La Sapienza in Rome and founder of the Circolo Gianni Bosio (Italy), Michael Frisch, former professor at the University of Buffalo and founder of The Randforce Associates (USA), and Anna Wylegała (Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland), are now being combined with new questions arising from our contemporary world

Another main feature that has accompanied oral history since the beginning and was confirmed here, is its interdisciplinary nature, which has nourished this practice with the contributions of anthropologists, linguists, and sociologists. This cooperation is one of the added values offered by oral history, a field in which the majority of people define themselves as outsiders, because they come from different expertise, oral history is not their main focus, or they use it without being aware of it. This is both a weakness and a strength of the discipline, which is still not fully recognized or legitimized even in countries where it has been developed for half a century, like Italy (Casellato, 2025); despite this, it is still able to welcome heterogenic contributions and be enriched by them. Indeed, this conference hosted anthropologists, sociologists, psychoanalysts, engineers, artists, and experts in memory studies and trauma studies.

The solidity of the older generation of historians that consolidated and spread this practice was once again evident, but it was intertwined with a florid young generation, quite extensively represented, that gave new stimuli to the discussions, proposing new topics and intriguing approaches.

## OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN TOPICS

Migration and war, from past to present, were confirmed as the pillars of oral history practices. The last conference in 2023 demonstrated that oral history is still able to maintain its militant vocation in the various countries across the world facing wars, and political, climate and migratory crises, as demonstrated by the plenary discussion: *Oral Historians Facing Crises: Attitudes, Fears, and Hopes*. It addressed the social and political meaning of oral history in the contemporary world and illustrated its deliberative role in empowering people by letting them narrate their own stories and depicting the positive and negative effects that this process can have on them. The presence of Maria Bashshur Abunnasr, an independent Lebanese researcher who works with the Palestinian Oral History Archive in the American University of Beirut (Lebanon), and Natalia Otrishchenko, member of the Center for Urban History of East Central Europe (Ukraine), who conducts oral history in the context of the war in Ukraine, stimulated the discussion on the possibilities and problems of oral history-making in a war context. As Abunnasr affirmed: ‘Narrating matters. It might not change the world, but it saves memory’. On the other hand, oral history can do harm, as Otrishchenko clarified, and it is challenging to conduct it in a context lacking trustworthy institutions. Her testimony from the Ukraine conflict appeared as a cry of alarm regarding the small contribution that historians can offer in a context of destruction, drawing attention to human beings in a dehumanized world, and emphasizing the responsibility to preserve the voices of people who might not be here tomorrow. The focus on two of the main conflicts of our time was evident because a session was reserved to reflect on the role of oral history after 7 October 2023, but it lacked a Palestinian point of view. On the other hand, the Ukrainian research on the current conflict was widely presented by a great number of researchers, also because of the vicinity of the conflict – 250 kilometres from Krakow – but the absence of a Russian counterpart and, in general, the exiguity of Russian presence, must be noted.

Another interesting consideration related to migration questions and the Western politics of contrast, that has been widely analysed by American researchers. For example, Fanny Julissa García (Oral History Association, USA), described her project *Separated: Stories of Injustice and Solidarity* focused on the Zero-Tolerance policy, adopted in 2017 by the previous Trump administration, under which 5,000 families were separated. Her research problematized the issues of conducting research in a context of state-inflicted violence, highlighting the menaces that American researchers experience, and that analysing certain political topics has become dangerous. She captured the phenomenon of anticipatory silence, a preventive silence that people adopt in order to avoid revealing information that might be incriminating for them in the future, and the precautions that researchers assume to protect their witnesses.

Topics like this draw attention to the increasing emphasis on data protection that oral historians all around the world have adopted to protect their witnesses and themselves, and how the spaces for free research are shrinking.

Moreover, the conference facilitated discussions on the environment and climate change, on which the keynote lecture by Rib Davis (Oral History Society, UK) *Oral History and Climate Change: Testaments of Weirding*, focused. By presenting his project of mapping of 90 projects on climate change from all over the world, he highlighted the role of oral historians in collecting people's life stories in the context of climate change, which speak more vividly than scientific data, with the aim of avoiding the normalization of the weird, i.e., the phenomenon by which people adapt to change until it becomes the new normality.

Following the rise of trauma studies, the notion of trauma was extensively discussed as an interpretative category. It was used, for example, by Ngozika Anthonia Obi-Ani (University of Nigeria), a researcher who has collected the voices of Nigerian women who experienced sexual violence during the civil war, were later blamed and excluded from society, and are now starting to tell their stories that nobody previously wanted to hear. The use of this category was highly debated by some researchers, like Emina Zoletić (University of Warsaw, Poland), who argue that it is used too loosely to describe situations that entail a certain level of suffering, and that the presence of trauma should be assessed through psychological analysis, particularly if we refer to collective trauma.

Attention was also dedicated to the effects that an interview can have on the two interlocutors. The debate on the consequences that interviews can pose to the informants and their families in re-living tragic experiences is still open. Interviews require maximum sensitivity by researchers, who should present to their interviewees information on opportunities for psychological therapies to deal with re-opened wounds. On the other hand, some researchers focused on the therapeutic role of oral history in coming to terms with the past and lightening the burden of pain which has often been hidden for years. We should also not forget that researchers can be traumatized by the dialogues in which they engage; in the opinion of Oni-Ani, this can be reduced thanks to Automatic Speech Recognition systems (ASR), that allow them to avoid repetitive listening to tapes.

Oral history has emerged not only as academic practice, but also as a way to empower communities and preserve their memories. Various sessions focused on this topic, and some interesting examples were provided by the project of the Group Varosha Famagosta to save the urban memory of Cyprus, and by the Mott Haven History Keepers program, directed by the County Bronx Historical Society and sponsored by Columbia University (US), to sustain the community of South Bronx in New York City to preserve its memory and valorise individual stories. Moreover, the plenary discussion *Oral History and Community Archives – Intersections and Impacts* described these kinds of entities, run by volunteers, that document the existence of a village, a community, or a social movement, and in various countries navigate between the need for funding, the fundamental independence they maintain from the state, and the need to follow national regulations.

The connection between communities and oral history was presented in two sessions dedicated to education and public history, highlighting the possibilities for pupils and

members of the public to engage in it as creators, protagonists, and users. The power of dissemination is crucial in our field of study, in involving communities in the preservation of their heritage, in testifying their present and boosting their acceptance of the other, and in increasing deliberative practices. Oral history connects people, reflecting on their memories and on their intergenerational transmission, thereby saving stories as a way of preserving culture. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is doing this in Canada by collecting stories narrated by Indigenous elders in the Gwich'in language as a way to transmit endangered memory and language to children, as Leslie McCartney from the University of Alaska Fairbanks (USA) exposed.

## FRONTIERS OF RESEARCH

A range of topics connected with new sensitivities, technologies, and methodological approaches, represents the future of this discipline.

The role of AI in the practice of oral history has increased sharply in recent years and has completely revolutionized the practice. ASR systems can help oral historians in the transcription of oral sources, simplifying the often tiring listening and punctual writing of words. However, Michael Frisch thinks that these systems are too accurate; they capture every sound and interruption, but do not always distinguish different voices. Moreover, transcription is much more than a mere list of words; it has to express suprasegmental signs that 'carry implicit meaning and social connotations' and the involvement of the narrator (Portelli, 1998, 65), and therefore the ASR transcription only represents an initial draft, which then has to be enriched and be transformed into something accessible and readable. That is why Frisch dedicated a workshop to ASR systems that help to reorganize the transcription according to the needs of the researcher and the public.

These systems open up many new possibilities, but they also bring along many uncertainties and threats to personal data, which may be collected and used for different, potentially unethical, purposes. ASR systems were one of the central themes of the conference, and were raised by various researchers who highlighted their qualities in easing the work or criticized the ethical and environmental threats associated with the massive quantity of electricity they require. A couple of sessions discussed the pros and cons of various ASR platforms, their accuracy according to the language analysed, and their possible uses. In addition, one innovative approach is the so-called Multimodal Digital Oral History (Smyth, Nyhan & Flinn, 2023) that connects the products of oral interviews, like sound, transcript, and metadata, to detect non-verbal and paralinguistic elements, like laughter, but also aims to understand how they can become language cues since they have different meanings across cultures.

The field of ethics was the most widely explored, with six sessions dedicated to it, expressing contemporary oral historians' concerns regarding the ethical implications of our work for interlocutors and researchers, because of strict legal regulations and individual concerns. A topic that emerged for its innovative approach was connected to oral history and health, considering the challenges of collecting the testimonies of individuals with mental and physical disabilities, to make oral history an empowering discipline for all. Other interesting reflections related to the challenge of interviewing

people with dementia, a practice that empowers and gives them autonomy and social interaction, but also gives rise to many ethical problems connected with their awareness and ability to consent to being interviewed.

Another approach that is not new, but is in constant development, is post-memory (Hirsch, 2012). Post-memory considers the relationship that descendants have with the traumas that they did not live through personally, but whose memory was so powerfully transmitted by their parents or grandparents as to create a memory of their own. Various sessions considered the processes of intergenerational transmission, the selection of memories, and their re-elaboration by descendants, but the term is still improperly used, or the approach is not sharply defined. The transmission of memory and its stratification was innovatively investigated by some young researchers: Anabelle Selvaggio (Deakin University, Australia), who studies the Sicilian diaspora in Australia, literally compared the narrations of the same memories by different generations in her family, while Emina Zoletić considered the intergenerational transmission of memory of the Bosnian War in the context of catching the semi-structured memory of children, noting how their narration was stimulated by the events in Gaza that they can relate to their experience. Also, Keira Gomez (University of Brighton, UK) explored the memories of young people in Londonderry (Derry) in the Northern Ireland conflict, analysing how these interviews acted as a catalyst for change in their relationships with their parents. This approach shifts our perspective on oral history, whereby rather than looking for direct witnesses and merely collecting information about events, researchers analyse the formation, transmission and evolution of memory. This approach seems to be expanding since the last witnesses of the great events of the twentieth century are disappearing.

This last challenge formed the basis of the panel discussion *Oral Archives: Which Voices Should be Preserved for Future Generations?*, that focused on ways of preserving and using the voices of people who are now deceased. Archives are containers of memory that express the resilience of words in time, and therefore require careful planning, valorisation, and updating. Bettina Favero, coordinator of the Archive of Word and Image in Mar del Plata (Argentina), which collects memories of Italian and Spanish immigrants in Argentina, reflected on her institution's methods of archiving these sources, their representativeness, the social value that motivates their preservation, and their possible meaning for research and future memory. Other panellists focused on the re-discovery and re-use of old archival oral sources and the new questions we can ask them. Urška Lampe from Institute IRRIS for Research, Development and Strategies of Society, Culture and Environment (Slovenia) explored the Archive of the Slovenian Security and Intelligence Service, one of the main institutions of the Communist regime that took control of Slovenia after the Second World War, questioning the value of these voices and exploring the reasons why they were preserved, while Armelle Girinon (Université Grenoble Alpes, France) and Ninon Chevrier (École normale supérieure de Lyon, France) presented their experiment of re-listening Nuto Revelli's interviews with women and how they can be reinterpreted by researchers in contemporary women studies.

The ongoing project of the re-use of oral sources of Resistance promoted by the Italian Association of Oral History (AISO) and the network of Institutes for the

History of Resistance ‘Ferruccio Parri’, that I presented in this session, is a pioneering experiment in dealing with the valorisation of Italian partisans’ voices collected since the 1970s, that have frequently been forgotten in archives, on formats that are now obsolete. These sources give a voice to marginalized people, who gained the right to speak by putting their lives at stake in their fight for democracy. These interviews also represent a window on the war and on the period in which they were taped; therefore, they can become a means by which to investigate memory, everyday life, women, work, environment, and other topics previously left out of the analyses. Moreover, this idea of re-use exemplifies how historical narratives influence perceptions of the past and can shape contemporary deliberations. Therefore, AISO and the Parri Network have promoted the re-discovery of these sources, and their re-use and mapping, debating the infrastructural, psychological, juridical, ethical, and epistemological questions connected to their study (Casellato, 2025, 204–205).

On the one hand, some academic projects have rediscovered these sources and tested the possibility of asking new questions that are urgent in our contemporary social and political context, and launching research on the seasons of memory and seasons of the oral history of Resistance, that appear to be the frontiers in this field. On the other hand, their re-use is oriented towards public history and education, by making the interviews accessible to a wider public in innovative forms like podcasts, interactive exhibitions, urban hiking, and audio-guided walks. Such debates demonstrated how crucial the wider reflection on this topic is, in terms of rethinking the construction of oral archives, and consolidating praxes for their use, to definitively prove their scientific validity.

## CONCLUSION

This year’s conference demonstrated the vitality of oral history and its growing diffusion. At events of this kind, the depth and innovation of the topics presented are often uneven, and the discipline still arguably suffers from its limited institutionalization and its liminality with others, resulting in approaches that are sometimes perhaps incomplete or outdated. However, this was compensated by the great number of new reflections outlined above, that constitute the new frontiers of research in this field. The added value of this biennial meeting is to foster encounters between scholars from very different backgrounds and trainings, in order to develop contacts and cross-contaminations. But we can do more by promoting IOHA scholarships and international exchanges, to encourage the development of the discipline in marginalized areas and help to receive stimuli from young researchers, thus keeping the discipline connected to communities and surrounding realities. Oral history’s strength lies in its concrete engagement with the world around us and the militant commitment of historians, and it must increasingly value multipolar and democratic deliberations. The next IOHA conference in 2028 in Macao in the People’s Republic of China will be a testing ground for this.

**Cecilia Furiuso Cenci**

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