



Jakub Gałęziowski

[Uniwersytet Warszawski]

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1595-4598>

“If not now, when?”

**- conversation about crisis oral history
with Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan**

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Interview with Mark Cave – Senior Historian at The Historic New Orleans Collection, former president of the International Oral History Association, and Stephen M. Sloan – Associate Professor of History and Director of the Institute for Oral History at Baylor University, past president of the Oral History Association in the U.S. active in local history organizations and initiatives in Waco (Texas).

Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan are editors of the first book to discuss the dynamics of crisis oral history fieldwork. *Listening on the Edge. Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis*, published by Oxford University Press (Oxford – New York 2014), offers theoretical and practical tools for oral historians and qualitative researchers who want to work in conflict and post-conflict settings. Chapters of their book cover many global crisis issues (wars, genocides, forced migrations), starting from Bosnia and Rwanda, through events in China, Afghanistan and Australia, and ending with crises in Mexico, Cuba and the U.S. The latter include both natural catastrophes and man-made disasters (e.g., Hurricane Katrina and the shootings at Virginia Tech). The authors give their insights on ethical and methodological challenges of this kind of research and present their fieldwork from various perspectives and overlapping disciplines such as oral history, qualitative sociology, psychology, and journalism. They also share their experiences connected with vicarious trauma and other forms of emotional distress for both sides of the interview: interviewers and interviewees. The book advances the literature on the practice and ethics of crisis oral history and provides a unique resource for oral history practitioners.

The conversation was recorded remotely on Zoom, 2 August 2022, revised and accepted by both interviewees.



Jakub Gałęziowski: To give you a short introduction, I have to come back to the article I wrote with my colleague Joanna Urbanek in 2017, where we touched upon the topic of crisis oral history.¹ At that time, many of our colleagues from the Polish Oral History Association pointed out that interviewing people affected by various catastrophes nowadays was not our job, it was not our tradition. A question about interviewing during an ongoing crisis appeared on the forum a few years later, at the beginning of the pandemic: should we document this unusual situation by recording people's voices, like many oral historians do in other countries? Again, the response of the association members was "no." And finally last

1 J. Gałęziowski, J. Urbanek, „Etyczny zwrot” w polskiej historii mówionej, „Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej,” vol. 7 (2017), pp. 8–10.

year, during the crisis caused by Aleksandr Lukashenko, when refugees from the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa found themselves stuck in the forests on the Polish-Belorussian border, I raised a similar question: shouldn't we document this event by recording the stories of all people affected by the crisis? The reaction was also far from enthusiastic.² Only the invasion of Russia into Ukraine changed this attitude, when colleagues from Lviv came with the idea of documenting testimonies of war. The project *24 February. 5 a.m.* was born, and it has been carried out by an international consortium of institutions. The Polish Oral History Association (POHA) got involved as a partner in this initiative.³ The crisis was right here on our doorstep, and we could not keep avoiding it and keep saying: "It is not our job." It has to be noted, however, that not all scholars shared this approach. There were some quite strong voices arguing that recording refugees in the middle of an armed conflict was not oral history, because oral history is about the past, not about the present. That is why we would like to return to your book *Listening on the Edge*, an edited volume about crisis oral history, and ask about this kind of intervention, which is not something new; only, it has not been recognized in our region yet. So, this is the starting point for our conversation. But the first question is very general: what is oral history for you?

Stephen M. Sloan: Yeah, I'll tell you a story: we had a fifty-year anniversary gathering in California in 2016.⁴ There was a young guy that was on the program committee and I asked him: "What is the theme for this gathering?" and he stumbled. He couldn't come up with one, so I said: "I would argue there is only one theme ever at meetings of the Oral History Association, that is the question 'what is oral history?'" Because it is something that we continue to wrestle with, what is oral history, what is not oral history. This is what we are doing right now, questioning, if we interview people about something that happened yesterday is that less oral history than interviewing somebody about something that happened ten years ago? Or twenty years ago? Or thirty years ago? Part of the problem is terminology; we have trouble with that term "oral history." Maybe, we need to think about

2 The initiative was taken by an interdisciplinary group of researchers "Badczaki i badacze na granicy." See: <https://www.bbng.org> (accessed: 1.09.2022).

3 Apart from POHA, the consortium included Center for Urban History from Lviv (Ukraine); Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, Polish Academy of Sciences; University of St Andrews (Great Britain); Center of Contemporary and Digital History, University of Luxembourg. See: <https://www.lvivcenter.org/en/updates/testimonies-from-the-war-2/> (accessed: 1.09.2022). The special guidelines for researchers were developed by Anna Wylegała and her research team, and were first published on the POHA website (in Polish and English), see: <http://pthm.pl/en/2022/08/19/war-testimony-methodology-and-ethics/> (accessed: 1.09.2022). We have also printed them in this volume.

4 The Oral History Association was launched in 1966 and serves as a national organization for American oral historians. See: <https://oralhistory.org/> (accessed: 1.09.2022).

it as qualitative interviewing; maybe, we need to think about it as primary source creation. Is there a value of doing historically minded qualitative interviewing now? I think, yes. We could all agree that there is a value. This is like sticking your foot in the river; you cannot do it in the same place twice. So, I am not sure that our goal should be to wait until everything is completely settled, until we reach the lake; and then gather our data. There is value in understanding what is happening at that moment. You know, August is very different than March was, and we cannot say that we did not do something worthwhile and meaningful doing the research at that time. I think the *9/11 Project* that was done by Columbia⁵ was important in that regard, the fact that they decided to do longitudinal work. Partly, the reason why they did that is because they had criticism about interviewing “now,” and they said they would interview also later. But I would argue that most important, the most valuable thing, was interviewing when memory was less fixed, the narrative was less set. I think people could be a little more honest about what they were experiencing, about what they were seeing, because there were no other forces that may have shaped their memory. No competing narratives, no competing viewpoints yet. It is definitely more emotional, it is definitely harder to deal with. We could always say: this is for someone else to do, but I do not know that anybody else is doing it...

Mark Cave: When we were working on the project following Hurricane Katrina in 2005,⁶ we could observe how memory was shifting, how people’s perspective on the event was changing very quickly. I think, what oral history can do is capture that moment in time and an emotional perspective of a certain time, and a point of view before this process of memory creation takes place. The relationship between what we were doing and what journalists were doing was also very interesting. Journalism, in times of crisis, looks a lot like oral history, since it relies on personal narrative to tell the story. But journalists are influenced by market forces and demands on what their readers want to hear. I think that oral history has a lot to offer communities with providing these initial explanations for why bad things happen. I think, we can play a big role in shaping those explanations with answers that will help communities to rebuild better.

5 *The September 11, 2001 Oral History Narrative and Memory Project*, managed by The Interdisciplinary Center for Innovative Theory and Empirics (INCITE) and Columbia Center for Oral History (CCOH). See: <https://incite.columbia.edu/the-september-11-2001-oral-history-project> (accessed: 1.09.2022). See also the project publication: *After the Fall: New Yorkers Remember September 11, 2001 and the Years that Followed*, M.M. Clark, P. Bearman, C. Ellis, and S.D. Smith (eds.), The New Press, New York 2011.

6 Hurricane Katrina was a tropical cyclone that struck the southeastern coastline of U.S. in late August 2005. It took 1,800 lives, and it has been ranked as the biggest natural disaster in U.S. history, see more: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Hurricane-Katrina/Aftermath> (accessed: 1.09.2022).

Stephen: Continuing what Mark said about journalists, they are not trying to gather people's stories on their own terms, allowing them to speak for themselves and giving them deep listening and long form. We are going in with a little less of an agenda than a journalist would, say, in that situation. We do not have a deadline, and we do not have end product in mind; we do not have any angle in which we were interpreting an experience; all these things show that we are privileged as oral historians. So, I think you are fighting a good fight to try to convince people that this is important to do. I would raise the question more like: "What are you waiting for?" To that objection of "we cannot do it now." If not now, "when"?, I guess, would be the question.

Jakub: Stephen, you wrote in the epilogue to the book, that "the heart of dynamic oral history has always been the exploration of crisis";⁷ could you explain that, please?

Stephen: Crisis is a turning point or decisive moment, marked by a kind of instability threatening danger to a person or group. I mean, those tension points I feel like are really what we are looking for in oral history, whether it is done on a very small scale or a very large scale. Oral historians have always explored social, economic, political, cultural, and religious turning points and captured how people have experienced societal and community crises, and the way those events or forces influenced their lives. But tension points in an individual story are really what we are trying to understand and explain in our work. I interviewed someone recently who was one of the first African American graduates of the university that I am at now to try to understand the tension between being black in an all-white institution in the South in the United States in the late 1960s, what was that like? And so, I think those tension points are things that like these crisis moments, and I am sure you have seen this in Poland. We are now learning a lot about Ukraine, learning about Russia; we are learning a lot about the United States in moments of tension like this, and they really pull those things back and expose things that can be examined and looked at. If I am interviewing somebody about just a life history, and I am working with them, I am trying to understand those turning moments, all those crisis points, those points of tension that exist in their life because I think those things are really revealing.

Jakub: Both of you were involved in projects linked to Hurricane Katrina, a disaster that affected individuals as well as whole communities. Could you share your experiences on working with survivors?

7 S.M. Sloan, *The Fabric of Crisis: Approaching the Heart of Oral History*, in: *Listening on the Edge...*, p. 273.

Mark: We started our interview work probably a month after the hurricane, and it was a way to make our museum⁸ relevant during the rebuilding of the city; it gave us a purpose. Of course, during that time people were not coming to the museum; they were not doing any of the things that they would normally do. So, this connected us to the community in a very real way; it allowed us to be a part of the recovery of the city. Very quickly, I noticed discrepancies in how people were remembering the event. Rebuilding a city takes a lot of optimism, and so the community did not want to look honestly at systemic issues that exacerbated the crisis. A good example of that would be what happened in the Superdome.⁹ During the crisis itself, journalists were there, and they were reporting all these horrible events that were going on inside the stadium. The Superdome was such a key part of our tourist economy, and the community needed in some way to collectively cleanse the memory of that place, and people began to say that those stories were exaggerated, that these bad things never did happen. However, in the interviews that we were able to capture with first responders that were working there, we documented that these bad things actually did happen. So, you see that the collective memory that was being formed had very little to do with the truth of the events. Our interviews acted as a good counter-narrative to this larger collective story that was being created by the community during the rebuilding effort. We were able to present those counter-narratives in some exhibitions by the fifth-year anniversary and tenth-year anniversary, and I think at least it helped people question these larger collective narratives about what happened.

Stephen: Mark, I had not heard about the Superdome inquiry yet, that is really interesting. So, I was on the Mississippi side doing interviews after Hurricane Katrina.¹⁰ The narrative, probably even internationally acknowledged, was that it was a New Orleans event, but most of the Mississippi coastline was under water all the way over to Alabama. I am giving you some U.S. geography here [*laughing*]. But because of the dominant narrative, folks in Mississippi were very eager to

8 The Historic New Orleans Collection (THNOC) is a museum, research center, and publisher, dedicated to the history and culture of New Orleans and the Gulf South. See: <https://www.hnoc.org/> (accessed: 1.09.2022).

9 The Mercedes-Benz Superdome (also called The Louisiana Superdome) was used as a shelter for about 16,000 residents unable to evacuate from the city and whose homes were destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. For more about the issue, see: D.A. Grano, K.S. Zagacki, *Cleansing the Superdome: The Paradox of Purity and Post-Katrina Guilt*, "Quarterly Journal of Speech," vol. 97 (2/2011), pp. 201-223.

10 The project was organized by Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at the University of Southern Mississippi; for the collection *Hurricane Katrina*, see: <https://usm.access.preservica.com/?s=KatrinaOH> (accessed: 1.09.2022); See also: S.M. Sloan, *Oral History and Hurricane Katrina: Reflections on Shouts and Silences*, "The Oral History Review," vol. 35 (2008), p. 176-86.

participate in our oral history project. They wanted to talk about what they had experienced. What is interesting, if they were a long-time residents they would begin to analogize about Camille, which was a big hurricane in 1969.

Both projects were institutionally based programs in the communities which had been struck by this, so there was a decision: do you respond to it or do you not respond? It was an ethical question. This is what Mark and I do well, and we could contribute to things that needed to be done. So, I was covering coastal areas on the Mississippi side, conducting interviews: from mayors of the coastal communities on the Mississippi side to kind of at-risk communities, such as the Vietnamese shrimpers in Biloxi.¹¹ We were thinking about different angles that would give us different views of the event. One of the challenges that Mark faced, and we faced as well is: "Who do you interview?" The passage of time gives you kind of a vetting of who to interview and who not to interview. So, Mark came up with some angles that they approach some groups in New Orleans; we wanted to interview everyone who wished to be interviewed on the Mississippi side.

Jakub: Mark, could you tell us who you interviewed first? And where the interviews took place?

Mark: In our work, we focused on first responders.¹² They were criticized for their conduct during the aftermath of Katrina, that their response was too slow. Many of the police officers left town; there were instances of first responders shooting at civilians. When we started the project a month after Katrina, the residents were dispersed all over the country, and first responders' agencies were the people in town. It was also, I think, helpful for them because they were under attack by the media. The media are charged in a crisis to find out who is to blame for what went wrong, and first responders – whether they are soldiers or policemen – are often the ones held responsible when bad things happen. So, it was an interesting approach for us, and we created relationships with the different agencies. We would set up for days and would go to their facilities. So, I just set up and interviewed them one after another. The interviews tended to be shorter than the interviews that I would like to conduct. I did try to include life story elements in all of them, and that is something oral historians do well. It granted us with insights into how

11 Along the Gulf of Mexico, such as Biloxi, there had been many seafood factories managed by Vietnamese fishermen and their families. For more about the phenomenon, see: <https://americanshrimp.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/GoldenGulf.pdf> (accessed: 1.09.2022).

12 In October 2005, THNOC initiated *Through Hell and High Water: Katrina's First Responders Oral History Project*, documenting experiences of local, state, and federal agencies. See: <https://www.hnoc.org/research/through-hell-and-high-water-katrinas-first-responders-oral-history-project> (accessed: 1.09.2022).

a person responds during a crisis and also gave a sense of how they were interpreting what was going on. Then, we had an interesting project with the correctional workers. One of the more controversial elements during Katrina was that the prisons were left unevacuated. After the flood waters came in, there were riots in the prisons, and correctional workers had to come in and restore order, and evacuate the prisoners. And there were a lot of bad things that happened during that evacuation. I was worried about those interviews, but they ended up re-affirming everything that they were condemned for. A lot of correctional workers that we interviewed were harshly criticized for the way they treated inmates during the crisis, but they wanted people to understand the situation that they were in and the reasons why they did what they did. And so sometimes people are not embarrassed by what they did; they just want to explain why they did it. They had their own perspective on it.

Stephen: And I did interviews in everywhere, from mayors' offices to FEMA trailers. They had these small trailers they distributed all along the coast so I would do interviews in FEMA trailers.¹³ It was an interesting experience: doing interviews on a slab that used to be somebody's home that had been kind of wiped away and pulled back into the Gulf of Mexico. I would say that was part of the value, right? I mean, the value of the moment; if I had them in my conference room six months later you might imagine it would be a little bit different experience for them and for me. I would say this was a little more true to what they were experiencing at the time.

Jakub: What kind of difficulties did you encounter when interviewing just after the hurricane?

Mark: The city was destroyed, and people were extremely emotional. First responders were angry in some ways about what they were going through; they too were rebuilding their homes, and they were often vilified in the media for their role during the crisis, although all of them thought that they had done a big service to the community during that time. They were probably being told by their supervisors that they should not talk to the media. They were afraid about how their stories would be spun, but they saw the work of oral historians as something perhaps a bit safer, and so I think they were able to open up more. I think they enjoyed the opportunity to share their story. The response agencies had a big event to mark the first anniversary. They used some of our interviews; stories were read by local celebrities as a way to honor their contribution. Our exhibitions, particularly for the first-year and the fifth-year anniversaries, were very well received, and we had

13 The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) helps people before, during and after disasters, see: <https://www.fema.gov/> (accessed: 1.09.2022).

a lot of people from the community coming in to listen to the interviews and to see a lot of the images that we collected, which was part of what we did as well.

Stephen: I think Mark really leveraged the way to get people to talk to them. We, oral historians, could come in and be seen as at least more neutral than some other outlets that were asking questions and wanting to know the story. I think in Mark's case and my case we had people wanting to talk to us, for different reasons, but part of that was because of who we were and what we were trying to do at that moment.

Mark: For most people, this was one of the major events of their lives, and the fact that Baylor University or our museum is interested in their story helps validate their experience.

Jakub: This is especially important for so-called ordinary people. Mark, did you also record stories of ordinary citizens?

Mark: Yeah. That came a few years after we began our work. In 2007, we started what we called *The New Orleans Life Story Project*.¹⁴ We tried to compensate for a lack of historical material that would be coming into our museum from residents. About 80 per cent of the city was flooded, so we assumed that a lot of the paper material that would normally be collected was lost, and so we created this larger life story project. We could see how important Katrina was as a turning point in people's lives. It continues today because we still capture such life stories.

Stephen: And I would like to reinforce Mark's point about life history, here. I always do life history as part of my work. That is another difference between us and journalists; we do not lead with: "How did you feel when your house collapsed?" That is not what we are doing. I believe we are doing a bit of a service in allowing people to begin to incorporate difficult things within their larger narrative, and the fact that this is for a public purpose gives it a level of meaning and value.

Jakub: In our work, we also need a broader framework.

Stephen: Of course, we as historians want to contextualize stories. I mean, before we can understand how someone encountered "X," we need a clear idea who that person is. Class, race, education, prior experiences – all these things that are shaping them before we get to the story, we are trying to capture. During the life

14 See: <http://hnoc.minisisinc.com/thnoc/catalog/3/10815> (accessed: 1.09.2022).

story interview, narrators do things that they have never done for themselves; they begin to make connections. Usually, they do not think about life that way. That is why we are trying to spend more time with them.

There is also another aspect I would like to point out here: the psychologist that we got to write a chapter for our book,¹⁵ at one point she said to me that in some ways she thinks that what we are doing is more valuable than what she would do in those sorts of settings. One of the reasons why she said that was the public purpose of oral history. Letting people have an opportunity to come to their story and share it publicly – most of our narrators were very glad to participate in the project. And it only has greater meaning over time, it only has more meaning now than it did then.

Jakub: Have you met people who did not want to talk to you?

Stephen: Sure. But, when it happened, I wanted to make clear that I had explained really what I am doing: “You know, I am not trying to change your story, I am trying to capture the way it is, and I am going to share it back with you as well so as to keep it the way you share it.” But yes, for some people it was too soon to participate.

Jakub: What were the reasons that they refused?

Stephen: I think for some of them it was still too raw, too emotional, too difficult to deal with at the time. But some of those people I came back to and interviewed later. Anyway, you have to be prepared for rejections. It is totally voluntary whether they want to participate or not.

Mark: We offered restrictions to interviewees. We had some people that wanted to be honest but feared that they might lose their job if they were criticizing their own agency. There were also a number of instances where people were looting stores to stay alive while they there were stranded. In some cases, they elected to restrict their interviews for a certain number of years, but people often just wanted their perspectives to be understood. Sometimes, it was controversial internally, whether we should offer that restriction or not; in 2030, there will be the last group of interviews that will be released to the public.

Jakub: Is the rest of the collection accessible to everybody?

15 G. Boulanger, *The Continuing and Unfinished Present: Oral History and Psychoanalysis in the Aftermath of Terror*, in: *Listening on the Edge...*, pp. 110–126.

Mark: I think 90 per cent of our interviews were open to everybody soon after they were conducted, and they are available through our online catalogue. They were used on the radio and exhibitions, as well as during other public events.

Stephen: Same here. We allowed restrictions, but it was a small percentage. You know, there is always a built-in window of processing the material, when we did interview review and interviewee review and could offer restrictions. Sometimes, limitations may be the best way to go. It happens we restrict things on our end, even if the interviewee has not ruled an administrative curtailment, because we want to operate in their best interests to not let that be available for a particular time.

Mark: We would not interview anybody who did not want to be interviewed. Nonetheless, still there were instances of people becoming emotional during the interviews. It was always important to validate that emotion and not just brush it over and move on with the conversation but to give them an opportunity to experience feelings during the interview. As an interviewer, I think I have grown over the years. When I was starting out, and I handled those situations, the instinct or the tendency was to move beyond the emotional issue quickly, particularly if somebody might be embarrassed by their own emotions. I have become better at acknowledging the value of this kind of sensitivity over the years.

Stephen: I distinguish hot memories and cold memories. Traumatic memories are hot memories, and usually we do not invite them; they just come upon us; they are in a dream, or we hear a sound, or we see an image, and the hot memories come back to us without our control. Cold memories are: "What is this room like? What color are the walls"? So, during the interview I try to balance between cold and hot memories. If I see it may be getting too difficult for an interviewee, I move back to some colder things, then we might re-explore some hotter. What people are doing in sharing hot and cold memories is they are reintegrating. They do not generally get to experience those things on their own terms but in an oral history interview they have the opportunity to experience some of those hotter memories on their terms rather than on the memory's terms, like coming back at them, when they did not invite them in. So, I let them know that they are going to run into those. They can take a break if they need to take a break, but that is something we need to be really careful with, as we do not want to scrub emotion from this interview. We do not want to cut it if they begin to cry, but you have to be sensitive to them. I always have tissues there with me. I let them know beforehand, that it is OK to have emotions, because these things are difficult to talk about, but the reason why we need to talk about them is that they are difficult. So those are kind of some initial thoughts I would have on it.

Mark: I agree with Stephen that those emotional moments are so important to document, and as an interviewer you need to let those emotions play out. Acknowledge them, and make people feel that their emotions are valid. But I have to say that when those emotions would come out in a narrative, it was not always at the moment that I thought would be the most emotional. It was sometimes when they were recollecting things that followed the crisis, maybe situations where somebody was uncommonly kind to them or something, and they were remembering that. That often surprised me, where these emotions would occur in the interviews. You need to be always prepared and ready to deal with them.

Jakub: This approach, however, requires interviewers to be empathetic, equipped with soft social skills, and aware of their own limits.

Mark: When you are screening interviewers, you should take that into account, that if somebody has had a similar traumatic experience, they might be more susceptible to vicarious trauma.

Stephen: This is something again I will credit the *9/11 Project*, their idea of a mental health expert assigned to teams that were conducting interviews and then during the kind of process of working through the material. We have vicarious trauma; there is compassion fatigue that can occur through conducting interviews, which is where you become either overinvolved or you become disengaged – all are real dangers. The interviewees you empathize with too much, or you withdraw your humanity from them. I think being aware of that is key, thinking about having balance that is, an interviewee awareness balance. This is ABC strategy: awareness, balance, and connection; creating ways to connect to other things.¹⁶ Therefore, it is good to be in a team. Processing these things as a team means that you are feeling the things that you are experiencing. I let students get some of those feelings down on paper to begin this kind of process. I think it is a huge step just to acknowledge that this is something we are going to be dealing with on our end. But I would caution interviewers, with what I found in my experience: I would not presume trauma. You must navigate that well, because some people will not go to difficult things for them to share, and I have seen interviewers

16 The “ABCs” of self-care is a tool for professionals who work with traumatized and vulnerable populations. As the short manual indicated: “Being aware of how our work can impact us and achieving and maintaining a sense of balance and connection in our lives, can prevent us from experiencing secondary trauma,” see: <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/Search/index.htm?query=ABC&searchbutton=Search&v%3Asources=mn-mde-live&qp=mn-mde-live> (accessed: 1.09.2022). For more, see: K. Saakvitne, L. Pearlman, *Transforming the Pain: A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization for Helping Professionals who Work with Traumatized Clients*, New York 1996.

at times get themselves in trouble because they went in looking for kind of difficult memories where that is not the interviewee's experience. And so just kind of being aware as an interviewer that they maybe just like describing what the weather is today, and nothing more.

Jakub: I agree with you; the notion of trauma is overused now. As you said Mark, probably interviewers from the community affected by the catastrophe are more exposed to vicarious trauma. Who did interviews in your project?

Mark: At first, I did most of the interviews, but then brought in a few members of our staff who had been trained, particularly when we went to the agencies, and there was one interview after another. It allowed us to have some breaks in-between. We tried to build up personal interconnections to solve some of this insider-outsider barrier. It helped to create a relationship with somebody in the agency, that the people you are interviewing saw this not entirely something from outside, that this is somehow connected to their group.

Stephen: We were having insiders and outsiders. We also had interesting connections with the field. One effective partnership we had in Biloxi was with the Mississippi Centre for Justice.¹⁷ They had interns that were mainly doing some kind of work with needy communities. They had questions that they wanted to have answered in that window, so we kind of folded some themes. But they were also interested in our approach, kind of longer form of oral histories within and questions about the past. So, we had mainly outsiders that were embedded in Biloxi, say for the summer, and we had some kind of insiders doing humanitarian work, and if they did have the skills or were willing to be trained, we were trying to put them to work.

Mark: I sometimes find that people want to tell you something, they want not to be in charge, and – in some ways – having an insider do the interview might complicate the narrative a little bit, as opposed to having someone tell their narrative to some sort of impartial listener.

Stephen: I would say it is hard to create a rule on that, because so much of that is up to the individual you are dealing with. I could see an insider that had a refugee experience being exceptionally positioned to conduct interviews, but I can also see it being problematic depending on the person and the circumstance. But to some extent everyone else is an outsider, an outsider is going to be listening to that story and

17 The Mississippi Center for Justice is a nonprofit, public-interest organization committed to advancing racial and economic justice. See: <https://mscenterforjustice.org/> (accessed: 1.09.2022).

trying to understand that story either now, or five, ten, twenty years into the future. And an outsider will write the history of this, so it is not going to be an insider history.

Jakub: So, you have had your own professional experiences in working in crisis and post-crisis settings, but how do it lead to the book you edited? Could you please share the context of developing that publication?

Stephen: I have to start with an idea of the Emerging Crises Oral History Research Fund,¹⁸ from the Oral History Association. They became aware that in these sorts of crisis situations there were researchers that needed funding to conduct oral history projects but a traditional window for grants is not always open: waiting for an RFP,¹⁹ writing an application, waiting for evaluation and a decision – it can take a year or at least six months. So, there was a need to provide a mechanism for immediate funding for projects. And so, this fund was established by OHA. Lists of applicants gave us knowledge of who was doing crisis work, at least in the U.S., what sort of crisis work they were doing, and in what areas. Then, the idea of a book was born. Probably the biggest challenge was getting representation from around the globe. But thanks to international networks, we found relevant authors.

Mark: We desired to make a guide for oral historians that are confronted with the prospect of doing crisis oral history in their own communities (like you in Ukraine and in Poland now). That is why we wanted the book to be rich in methodology, but also have a good geographical representation. This was one of the key factors in why we chose the chapters that we did. We separated the book into two sections. The first dealt with the issue of trauma. The second half of the book dealt with the creation of explanations for crisis: the sort of long-term shifting of memory after the crisis. I think those were the two major themes in the book.

Jakub: Most of the projects covered by the book were implemented in the aftermath of disasters. What about interviewing in on-going crises?

Stephen: I interviewed survivors of the genocide in Darfur. The whole project was framed in a way that we interviewed genocide survivors that were in Texas. It included people from Cambodia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Burundi, and Darfur. But only the Darfurian genocide was on-going, so Darfurians were talking about an experience

18 The OHA finances oral history research projects of up to \$4,000, when undertaken in situations of crisis in the U.S. and internationally. For more about the program, see: <https://oralhistory.org/award/emerging-crisis-research-fund/> (accessed: 1.09.2022).

19 A request for a proposal (RFP) is one of the methods organizations use for professional staff to carry out the project.

much differently than the Cambodians, who experienced genocide that occurred in the 1970s. I had to be very aware of that when going into the interviews. But this was already a recovery phase (we have three steps: rescue, recovery, and rebuilding, the so-called 3 Rs). We would not do interviews during the rescue phase obviously. Oral history can be done well during the recovery phase, as a sort of moving out of an event.

Jakub: How long should we wait before interviewing?

Mark: I think, so long as somebody is able to talk to you and willing to talk to you, there is a value to the interview. Early interviews are important to capture the emotional perspective of the event. How you view the event is going to change as you live your life. I found, particularly in the interviews that we did, that the highly charged emotions of the experience are often the glue that holds the memory of the event together, and the longer that you wait the more the memory becomes chiseled down and more simple. We wrote about the issue of archival memory in the book. As you tell a story over and over again over time you lose segments of the story entirely from your memory, just because they do not fit into that narrative that you have told again and again. So, you know, early interviews capture much more detail of the event. Interviews conducted later on capture “distilled memory,” but often with the importance of the event in your life story. They offer different things, both of which I think are important.

Stephen: I totally agree with Mark. I would love to have more follow-up projects, like the one they did in Columbia. I think there is tremendous value in more projects doing things like that.

Jakub: As we can read in the chapter by Mary Marshall Clark,²⁰ this follow-up format allowed researchers to recognize groups of affected people who had not been captured in the first set of interviews. In many projects, there is often this fear that they are not all the voices, that this is not a whole picture of the event.

Mark: Mary Marshall described the sociological framework for her project. Narrators originated from different social groups; they varied in age, gender and ethnicity. We did not really do that with our crisis project. The first responders we interviewed were prepositioned in places throughout the city; so, by focusing our efforts on them, we got a good geographical coverage of the whole city, but it was also a limited perspective. We did not capture the whole experience of refugees,

20 M.M. Clark, *A Long Song: Oral History in the Time of Emergency and After*, in: *Listening on the Edge...*, pp. 241–261.

of course, on a large scale... But other projects tried to do it. So, you have to collaborate with other institutions, hoping that they are doing what you are not doing.

Stephen: I am always aware of who we are not talking to. I would say this should not be an excuse for inaction; it should be a motivation to do something. Mark had his angle he came up with; I had my angle. You cannot be comprehensive. We are both thinking about this as democratic practice. We want to be democratic in how we are proceeding. We want to think about the angles through which events need to be understood and looked at, but we recognized that we cannot talk to everyone.

Jakub: As Elena Poniatowska²¹ stated, oral history is also the voice of the anonymous, of those who do not have a voice...

Mark: Yeah, she had that a very poetic analogy of oral history being like the instruments rescue workers were using to search for sounds beneath the rubble, that is why I included her thoughts in my introduction to the book.²²

Jakub: Are you thinking about a second volume of *Listening on the Edge*?

Mark: I think that would be a great idea. What do you think, Stephen?

Stephen: Maybe that might be. Mark and I have a book coming out next month on oral history and the environment.²³ We want to get this one off, and then we will talk about it.

Jakub: So, good luck with your new publication and many thanks for the conversation.

Mark: Thank you.

Stephen: Thank you.

21 Elena Poniatowska (b. 1932) – Mexican journalist and author of Polish origin. Famous for her interviews with eyewitnesses of various events in Mexican history, published in the press and as edited volumes.

22 M. Cave, *What Remains: Reflections on Crisis Oral History*, in: *Listening on the Edge...*, pp. 7–8.

23 *Oral History and the Environment Global Perspectives on Climate, Connection, and Catastrophe*, S.M. Sloan, M. Cave (eds.), Oxford University Press, Oxford–New York 2022.