Chapter 6

Partnering for Egyptian Heritage Oral History

Internal and External Collaborations Pursued by the Archives

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The story of Egypt and its people is a long one, written literally in stone at ancient monuments throughout the country. But perhaps the best way to tell the story of its contemporary period is through its inhabitants' voices, by means of recorded oral history interviews. Oral history has become a major means of historical documentation for the Archives within the Rare Books and Special Collections Library of the American University in Cairo (AUC), one of the founding members of the AMICAL Consortium of American international liberal arts universities. A variety of collaborations and partnerships have enhanced the Archives' efforts to document Egypt and AUC through oral history, thus producing rich primary resources for researchers, faculty, and students.

This paper examines the progress of the Archives' oral history program at AUC in its early stages, the experience of the University on the Square: Documenting Egypt's 21st Century Revolution project after 2011, the effort to interview displaced locals of the Qurna village area in southern Egypt in 2016, and more recent initiatives. The focus will be on the collaborations fostered with faculty at AUC and especially with individuals outside AUC closely tied to and knowledgeable about local communities (most notably in the case of the Qurna Hillside Oral History Project), within an intercultural context. The chapter will include discussion of how these collaborations emerged, were mutually beneficial, and combined the oral history experience and resources of the Archives with the documentary passion, local contacts, and expertise of its partners. It concludes by suggesting paths other institutions can follow.

AUC, Liberal Arts, and Bridging Cultures

Linking cultures has been part of the mission of AUC since its beginning in 1919. Founder Charles R. Watson came from a family of American Protestant missionaries active in Egypt and sought to bring to the country higher education on the model of

American universities while simultaneously being of service to its host society. Along these lines, during its early decades AUC characterized itself as "a bridge of friendliness" between America and the Middle East.[1]

While Egypt had a long tradition of institutions of higher education (in particular Al Azhar, the leading center of Sunni Islamic learning, which dated to the tenth century), AUC came onto the scene shortly after the emergence in 1908 of Egypt's first modern university, the Egyptian (now Cairo) University. Then as now (although now one of over twenty private universities, alongside twenty public institutions), AUC consciously set itself apart from other universities in Egypt by virtue of its focus on providing students with a liberal arts education that offered exposure to varied branches of inquiry, rather than training in a singular field of study. Today AUC's nearly 5,500 undergraduate students can take classes in and choose from among thirty-six majors, and its 1,000 graduate students from among forty-four programs. English is the language of instruction at AUC, which it has in common with other private universities in Egypt.

The meeting of cultures has been an important facet of AUC's mission, with the incorporation of international students into its mostly Egyptian student body, and also the university's multinational faculty encompassing Egyptians, Americans, and citizens of other nations. AUC has long engaged with Egypt and issues facing the country, as early as the 1920s and 1930s inviting speakers to discuss contemporary topics, sponsoring student projects to promote health and hygiene in rural villages, and bringing in teachers from Al Azhar University to provide intense Arabic language instruction.

AUC's Libraries and Egypt's Heritage

Libraries at AUC have long played a key role in supporting the university's liberal arts mission, and this became coupled with an emphasis on documenting Egypt's cultural and historical heritage in the 1950s. During that time AUC acquired the library and photograph collection of Sir K. A. C. Creswell, a British resident of Egypt considered a founder of the study of Islamic art and architecture; his library included rare books and thousands of photographs depicting Egyptian architectural monuments. Over the years multiple library units at AUC collected rare books (like the Napoleonic expedition's *Description de l'Egypte*), photographs, maps, and other documentation on Egyptian history, leading to the creation of a Rare Books and Special Collections Library (RBSCL) in 1992.

In addition to maintaining the university's archives, the RBSCL came to acquire major collections of personal papers from leading contributors to Egyptian society and culture, such as architect Hassan Fathy, photographer Van-Leo, and other important artists, journalists, and champions of societal change and women's rights. Despite AUC's small size by comparison to other universities in Egypt (with 6,000 students among a nationwide student population of around two and a half million),[2] it has played an outsized role in documentation of national heritage, as archival collecting is more typically a function of institutions like the Egyptian National Library and Archives and the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, rather than of university libraries.

Managing these collections are a mix of faculty-rank librarians and archivists (three American nationals) and Egyptian staff members (twenty-five) in the RBSCL, a unit of AUC's Libraries and Learning Technologies. Besides those in the Archives department,

personnel are divided among several units, including a conservation laboratory, a digitizing center, reference services, and sections specialized in subjects such as architecture and photography. Library or archivist faculty possess professional degrees in library science and archival studies, and staff members' backgrounds vary from library training to specialized study in areas such as Islamic art or bookbinding.

Oral History at the AUC Library: Origins, the University on the Square Project, and Partnerships

Soon after I arrived at The American University in Cairo as University Archivist in 2001, I came across two volumes with an intriguing title on their spines: "AUC History on Tape." These were the transcripts of oral history interviews conducted with early administrators, faculty, and students in 1969 by AUC's Alumni Director Manucher Moadeb-Zadeh and in 1973 by AUC history professor Lawrence Murphy (who was then writing a book on AUC's history). Recorded on cassette tapes stored in the Archives, these interviews captured the voices of members of AUC's founding generation, from faculty, who moved from the US to Egypt in the 1920s to staff the fledgling school, to AUC's first female student, who enrolled in 1920. Interviews with personnel active in later periods documented changes at the university as Egypt changed in the era of President Gamal Abel Nasser, such as its navigation of nominal government takeover after the country's defeat in the 1967 war.

Inspired by these predecessors' work a generation earlier, and realizing that the existing documentary record found in the Archives did not tell the whole AUC story and also lacked the immediacy of the human voice, I decided to launch an oral history initiative with members of the university community. Starting in 2005, using digital recording software on a laptop computer, I began to interview longtime university personnel, including faculty who had just begun their careers at AUC at the time Moadeb-Zadeh and Murphy were recording their oral histories. A retired staff member came on board to co-conduct interviews on visits to Egypt, and occasionally library interns participated as well. Online access to the interviews is offered via the Rare Books and Special Collections Digital Library on OCLC's CONTENTdm platform.[3]

During this period the Economic and Business History Research Center (EBHRC) was founded at AUC. A core part of its mission was the recording of oral histories with figures who had significant impact on Egypt's economy, and I collaborated with the center in giving workshops on oral history theory and methods, with a special focus on the students associated with the EBHRC who would conduct interviews. The role of the Archives in preserving and providing access to the interviews was explored as well (although only realized after the center's closure in 2016).

Historic change came to Egypt in 2011 with the demonstrations at Tahrir Square and elsewhere that brought down President Hosni Mubarak, in the process dramatically shaping the scope and scale of the Archives' oral history program. That spring a project called University on the Square: Documenting Egypt's 21st Century Revolution was launched by an interdisciplinary team of administrators, faculty, and computing professionals from around the university to collect visual documentation and artifacts as well

as producing oral history interviews with members of the AUC community about their involvement in the demonstrations and other events.[4]

The interview component was handled by journalism faculty with audio documentary expertise, EBHRC staff (whose personnel and students conducted many early interviews), along with the Archives, which came to manage the oral history activities, including interviewing, preservation, description, and online access (via a collection in the Archives' digital collections platform).[5] The Archives' collaboration with other individuals and units resulted in an upgrade in equipment, methods, and procedures—for example, more detailed agreements and question scripts.

Different approaches grounded (at least partly) in culture became evident, but strengthened rather than weakened collaboration: Egyptian EBHRC staff stressed the importance of recording interviews in Arabic due to the link between the local language and national identity, and it was agreed to leave the choice of language up to the interviewee and so to allow for both Arabic and English. But in contrast to previous EBHRC practice, it was decided not to convert local Egyptian dialect to formal Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) in the production of transcripts (rendering transcripts in MSA had appealed to many of the EBHRC's earlier high-status interviewees).

Perhaps the biggest impact of University on the Square was expanding the coverage of the Archives' oral history initiatives, from the life of the university to the history (in this case contemporary history) of Egypt as a society and culture. But there were other long-lasting impacts too. First, the project involved engaging with faculty and other experts in particular fields of inquiry. In identifying individuals to be interviewed, the project sought and received input from political science faculty at AUC, civil society professionals, individuals in the arts community who could suggest interviewees such as street artists, and even people with links to street vendors and "ultras"—football fans who battled the riot police. As a result, the pool of interviewees was no longer restricted to AUC community members.

With two American archivists handling project matters, it was essential to have Egyptians tapped into these various areas of society provide advice and contacts for increasing the relevance of the project. Alertness to the increasingly fraught political situation in the country in the years after 2011, on the part of Egyptian and American participants alike (interviewees, interviewers, and archivists), also informed project methods, such as the decision after 2013 to make all recordings anonymous through audio editing and description techniques.

A second innovation was incorporating into the University on the Square oral history archive donated interview recordings from other projects and researchers. When members of our project team came into contact with representatives of other project groups who came to Egypt to do interviews, like the Poetic Portraits of a Revolution initiative from Canada, arrangements were made to archive interviews they produced. In addition, several who contacted the Archives for revolution research material, such as one studying the role of the Muslim Brotherhood, agreed to donate their own interviews for inclusion in the University on the Square archive. With metadata and summary descriptions applied by Archives staff, these would be made available to researchers for listening at the Archives or via our Rare Books and Special Collections Digital Library.

Finally, for the first time students were actively engaged with the oral history process in the Archives. Hired as work-study students, project staff, or volunteers, students with

background in journalism or simply an interest in documenting the political change in Egypt (including some who themselves had been protesters) conducted interviews for the project. Some continued with the project over multiple years, helping the Archives develop a base of interviewing staff.

These last two developments intersected as the project linked up with AUC teaching faculty who incorporated oral history interviewing into their classes. Most notable were Visiting Professor Nancy Gallagher's history classes in 2012, which required her students to conduct an oral history interview to be contributed to the University on the Square archive. This involved training the students in correct procedures, and for foreign study-abroad participants in the courses, having Egyptian students and project staff orient them to the local context, in this way bridging cultural divides.

In parallel to the continuing University on the Square project, the Archives began to produce other oral histories beyond the scope of life at AUC. In fact, interviews with AUC faculty, administrators, or alumni had already been revealing of Egypt's social and political context. Questions about interviewees' lives before coming to AUC produced accounts of their early education and parents' background, eliciting stories, for example, about family businesses being nationalized by the Nasser regime. But a new direction for oral history interviewing emerged as library and archives staff began to conduct interviews with individuals who made important contributions to Egyptian society apart from their participation in the life of AUC, and beyond University on the Square and the 2011 revolution.

Some of these interviewees, such as women's rights campaigner Aziza Hussein, had donated collections to the Archives. In other cases, Rare Books Library curators of specialized collections, such as our Regional Architectural Collections, identified important contributors in their field, such as an eminent elderly urban planner who spoke about architects whose collections the library held. Partnerships with AUC faculty were also formed, especially seeking suggestions and contacts for individuals prominent in particular fields. This resulted in interviews, sometimes co-conducted by myself and the faculty partner, with artists, religious leaders, and other leaders in Egyptian arts, culture, and society.

As with the University on the Square project, the Archives continued to take advantage of opportunities to build its oral history collections through donated interview recordings. An example was a researcher who was using Archives' holdings about the development of a Cairo suburb, who deposited digital recordings and transcripts of interviews she had conducted with elderly longtime residents of the neighborhood. These were mutually beneficial partnerships that provided these documentarians with a way to archive and make their "raw" primary source recordings and other materials available to other researchers and helped AUC's Archives grow its oral history archive.

A Full-Fledged Partnership: The Qurna Hillside Oral History Project

Something that always appealed to me about library and archives work was that, in being of service to the university community and beyond, it brought me into contact with individuals from a variety of backgrounds and with a diversity of interests. It allowed

me to get a taste of various disciplines, whether they be ethnography, women's history, or even geometrical Escher-like tessellations (the interest of one researcher who identified a historic paving stone pattern on the AUC campus), without the impossible task of specializing in them all.

So in interacting with people at university events (usually faculty, whatever their field of study, but also others from outside AUC), I typically make, not an "elevator pitch" but an "elevator appeal," asking about possible ways we can collaborate. Most often this takes the form of asking for suggestions for people in their field, or with whom they have come into contact, who would be good candidates for oral history interviews. One relationship I sought to build in this regard was with various directors of AUC's Middle East Studies Center (MESC, which had a rotating leadership position). By 2014 I had worked with MESC directors for years, using students for archival projects, assisting with research assignments, and getting tips about possible oral history approaches to make.

That year the MESC director put me in touch with Caroline Simpson, a British national who had lived on-and-off in Luxor in southern Egypt for over twenty years. Based on close interactions with the local community, Simpson had developed a keen interest in the lifeways of the people of Luxor's Nile west bank, in an elevated area known as the Qurna hillside. Over the years Simpson had documented the area's crafts and domestic architecture through photography, launched the website Qurna History Project (http://www.qurna.org), set up two on-location exhibitions, and presented about Qurna at conferences. While unaffiliated with an academic or research institution, Simpson was an expert on Qurna and its people (known as Qurnawis) and passionate about their past, present, and future.

An initiative she still had in her sights (going back at least a decade) was an oral history project, for which she felt a sense of urgency due to significant changes facing the inhabitants of the Qurna hillside.[6] From 2006 the Egyptian government had relocated residents of traditional village areas in Qurna to purpose-built new housing developments in the area. A similar effort had taken place in the 1940s, when state officials commissioned leading architect Hassan Fathy to design a new settlement to rehouse the residents of Qurna village (whose houses were located above pharaonic-era tombs), but the effort failed when the inhabitants simply moved back to their previous homes. In the 2000s the government applied greater pressure for residents to move, culminating in the 2006 destruction of many of the houses of Old Qurna village, whose hilltop facades had been an iconic view for generations of tourists to Luxor's west bank. These actions produced scenes of bulldozers demolishing houses in front of despondent occupants.

Simpson believed that as residents of traditional settlements in the Qurna area were uprooted, many aspects of their way of life would disappear, such as traditional medicine, supernatural beliefs, and their relationship with the natural world. Advances in technology and access to information, and the tendency of many local men to leave the area for job opportunities elsewhere, had already brought great changes. Simpson observed this drastic reshaping of the social fabric of the community caused or accelerated by relocation and feared that the locals' customs and beliefs (and memory of them) would be lost, especially as the older generation passed. As she put it, "It became clear to me that it would be almost criminal if work was not done to record, collect and analyze the beliefs and traditions of Qurnawi women before death and increasing age and the fading memories of life on the hillside destroys them for ever."[7]

Her challenge was the lack of resources, both human and financial, to launch such an effort. This is where the Archives at AUC came in. Simpson and I corresponded about what she envisioned for an oral documentation project, and I discussed what we could offer: equipment, advice on interviewing and recording best practices, and our digital collections platform to provide access to the resulting resources. This left, however, the question of who would conduct the interviews and how they would be made available for research through editing for sound quality and transcribing. Funding would be required, and so Simpson and I joined forces to put together an internal AUC faculty research grant proposal, which was accepted and resulted in the Archives being awarded $10,000 from the university's vice provost for research.

This funding supported the hiring of a team of interviewers who would travel from Cairo to Luxor and interview relocated residents. The interviewers hired were all Egyptians and native Arabic speakers, but they were diverse in other ways. They had a mix of experience, including two female work-study students who had worked on the University on the Square project, a male library staff member from our digitization center, a male AUC anthropology master's degree recipient, and a female graduate student in that program. That mix of men and women was initially considered necessary due to the conservative social mores of the rural Qurna area, in order for men to interview male interviewees and women the female subjects, although it turned out that this alignment was neither adhered to strictly nor as necessary as anticipated.

Figure 6.1
Caroline Simpson (center), with AUC project team to her left and local Qurna liaisons on her right.

The Qurna inhabitants to be interviewed were solicited by two local residents brought on board by Simpson, Abdu Daramalli and Ahmed ElTayeb, who had experience assisting foreign archaeological expeditions that visited the area. The involvement of these two local partners was essential in gaining the trust of locals in order to persuade them to take part in the interview process. To this end Simpson and Archives staff collaborated

in drafting an explanatory leaflet in Arabic to explain the project to locals; it would be read or paraphrased by Daramalli and ElTayeb for illiterate residents. In a revealing demonstration of the importance of local knowledge, Archives' staff had to revise the information leaflet to change the Arabic spelling of "Qurna" to match the way locals spelled it.

Figure 6.2
AUC Project team meeting with former Qurna resident.

The question scripts generated by the project reflected the partnership's pairing of local expertise and experience with oral history work. While the Archives offered a basic framework for the scripts, Caroline Simpson provided the main substance of the questions based on her deep understanding of the Qurnawis' way of life in order to elicit information she felt should be documented. In addition, the veterans of AUC's graduate program in anthropology offered ideas on what to incorporate as well. When the AUC interviewers arrived in the Qurna area, Simpson and local liaisons Daramalli and ElTayeb oriented them about the history of the place and its people to prepare them for conducting the interviews.

Over the course of two weeks in April and May 2016, AUC's project team interviewed about seventy relocated former residents of the Qurna hillside. (Audio and transcripts of the interviews are available in AUC's Rare Books and Special Collections Digital Library.[8]) These elderly and late-middle-aged men and women painted a

portrait of the Qurna community, depicting family life, traditional medicine, relations between neighbors, religious faith and practices, and festivals and celebrations. They described the natural environment, their homes, and their work, from farming to craft making to archaeological digs to the tourist industry so central to the life of the area. Major events, from natural disasters to the visits of celebrities and politicians, were also recalled. And the often painful experience of relocation figured prominently in the interviews, from the demolition of homes to the resettlement in new housing, but with some positive reactions too about the government's program to move the former residents.

Previous library initiatives proved beneficial during the course of the Qurna project, as team members who had more extensive experience with the Archives' oral history work trained the others in interviewing techniques, from technical matters to personal interaction with interviewees. Responsibility lay with veteran interviewers, as once interviewers landed in Luxor, they were on their own, without direct supervision by myself or other Archives staff. In that setting, peer mentoring flourished out of sheer necessity. Regardless of their status, whether a master's degree graduate, staff member, or undergraduate student, it was their previous on-the-ground experience that gave project members the capacity to elevate their colleagues. The interviewing experience itself, through engagement with people from different geographic, class, and cultural backgrounds (even within Egypt) from their own clearly had an educational impact on the interviewers as well. Interviewers' reflections on their experience included statements such as "The best is sitting with people and talking… the way in which people 'open up'"; "I feel that I have built up relationships [and am] getting to know people on a deeper level, hearing their stories"; and "Learning about things and people I had never known before [was] a life-changing experience."[9] This indicates the kind of potential for out-of-the-classroom learning made possible through participation in projects like this one, and more generally by students contributing to libraries as volunteers, project hires, or work-study assistants.

The work was not without its difficulties. Some were logistical, such as southern Egypt's extreme daytime temperatures that necessitated dual shifts of early morning and early evening interviewing around a long midday break. Then there was the challenge of handling what could be termed cultural issues. These included navigating differences between the local dialect of the interviewees and the dialect of the Cairo-based interviewers, although all were Arabic-speaking Egyptians. And due to the limited literacy of many of the interviewees, the standard oral practice of having them sign a written oral history agreement was replaced with recorded verbal consent instead.

Some hurdles could not be overcome, as when potential interviewees declined to be interviewed due to their discomfort with the use of a recorder, or in several cases when women were willing to be interviewed but their husbands or sons refused to allow it. (In one instance Simpson reported that an interview was underway when a male relative demanded it be stopped and deleted.) But most of the time the partners of the AUC oral history team, Simpson and Daramalli and ElTayeb, were able to facilitate smooth operation of the interviewing process. AUC's interviewers came equipped with oral history techniques and experience, recording technology, and enthusiasm, but it took the partners to equip them with the necessary context and contacts. The combination allowed

the project to achieve its goal of documenting a dispersed community and preserving the memory of an important part of Egypt's heritage.

Succeeding Partnerships, Other Models

In 2017, AUC's Law and Society Research Unit (LSRU) approached the Archives seeking advice for a project supported by a grant it had received. Its goal was to build an archive of interviews with figures in Egypt's Islamist movements who had shaped the country's politics. As with Simpson and the Qurna project, the LSRU had the subject expertise and the connections with individuals who were potential interviewees. In contrast, in this case it also possessed the resources, in funding and personnel (people hired on the grant), to proceed.

Its missing ingredient was expertise in oral history, however, and an arrangement was made for the Archives to provide training for staff in oral history methods. Through a series of workshops and follow-up meetings in early 2018, Archives staff trained the grant project personnel in interviewing techniques and equipment usage, documentation practices such as the use of consent forms and interviewee agreements, and ways of transcribing interviews. The Archives also provided the project with recording equipment and agreed to provide research access to the oral histories by hosting them in our online digital library. In these ways the Archives replicated a model tried years earlier with its relationship with AUC's EBHRC.

Other partnerships have been cultivated in recent months. AUC faculty in visual arts and music have provided contacts for leading figures in those fields as possible oral history interviewees. The life of Egypt's ethnic subcommunities has been another focus for the Archives, with collaborations begun with members of the Armenian, Italian, and Jewish communities and some interviews undertaken. And AUC graduate students who as part of their own research have conducted interviews with members of these groups have agreed to ultimately deposit interviews in the Archives.

Collaboration as the Key to Oral History: What Makes It a Fit

Like pieces of a puzzle, the combination of library or archives oral history practitioners' expertise and that of academic specialists and community "insiders" beyond the walls of the library is what makes the picture come together. The importance of collaboration is something that has been recognized by other oral history practitioners. As Mark Winston of Rutgers University-Newark's Library has written, "As potential partners, community members often have access to interviewees, credibility, and the desire to capture these stories, but they may lack the knowledge of research design. However, university partners, including teaching faculty and librarians, bring expertise in research design, subject or disciplinary areas, organization, data storage, digital media, web design, search software, coding and retrieval, as well as ownership and rights issues."[10] At institutions beyond AUC, partnerships have in these ways brought together the ingredients for successful oral history efforts.

This has been the case at leading institutions in the field such as Columbia University's Center for Oral History. In 2001 director Mary Marshall Clark partnered with faculty on a major oral history project about the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City. Faculty in history and sociology there were integral to the inception of the initiative, defining its scope, raising funds, and facilitating student involvement as interviewers.[11]

Such collaboration was productive at AUC as well, with faculty giving support with ideas and contacts at the outset of the University on the Square project, providing a link with Qurna expert Caroline Simpson, and offering ideas on directions to take and contacts to make in our other initiatives. Partnering with the faculty member behind the LSRU's project to interview Egyptian Islamists gave us the chance to plug into something already conceived and with grant resources. The LSRU's academic subject knowledge and personal connections developed in the course of research have complemented the Archives' specific oral history expertise.

Years prior to these collaborations, faculty members had donated their documents and research materials, such as interview transcripts, to the Archives in connection with our collecting of faculty personal papers. But the immediacy of the University on the Square project brought home the idea to teaching faculty that archivists and librarians at AUC could operate as partners in building primary source research collections. Being proactive in the area of acquiring contemporary material to be archived (through oral histories but also by taking in photographs, protest banners, etc.) and doing so through public outreach efforts such as events and social media, may have altered the image of the Archives among faculty. The image of a cloistered treasure house was replaced, perhaps, by that of a dynamic center staffed by colleagues who were, like teaching faculty, actively engaged with the actors and events of the day and keen to document them.

Faculty also offered an important link to students, connecting the Archives with young people who could conduct interviews and thus provide vital staffing for our projects. But collaborating in this way has also opened up new kinds of learning opportunities that complement what teaching faculty seek to accomplish in the classroom. Engaging students with oral history, through training and practical experience (during the University on the Square project and beyond), has allowed them to play the role of knowledge creators themselves. Based on feedback received, the experience has been enriching for students (as it was for the Qurna project participants) and appreciated by teaching faculty for enhancing student learning. In the process a new generation has learned about the possibilities of oral history, and the Archives has repositioned itself as a new kind of partner with AUC's teaching faculty in promoting AUC's educational mission.

The contribution of individuals who are outside AUC, but who are "insiders" with particular communities or groups, has been even more important as a catalyst for the Archives' oral history efforts. This has allowed for avenues the Archives could not have otherwise taken, linking us with interviewees with fascinating stories to tell. Without these partners' contacts and introductions, interviews with individuals like football ultras who participated in the revolution, the former residents of Qurna, or ethnic groups in Egypt could not have taken place. Perhaps as important, the trust that our collaborators have built through their engagement with communities such as these made interviews possible. But at the core, it was the passionate conviction among these partners, such

as Caroline Simpson with the Qurnawis, that the community they knew needed to be documented, and their local knowledge of the group, that facilitated the work.

This kind of collaboration produces a symbiotic relationship between the oral history professionals in the library or archives and their partners, with mutual benefits to both sides. Insiders dedicated to a community can ensure that it gets documented, through the contribution of the library's or archives' expertise in oral history interviewing techniques, personnel or training, and infrastructure (equipment, digital access platform, etc.). Researchers who have conducted their own interviews ensure that these will have a life beyond their own research by donating the audio recordings and associated material to a repository that can preserve and make them accessible. Ultimately, as at AUC, the library or archives can in these ways build oral history collections that document society and noteworthy individual lives for use by researchers now and into the distant future.

Pursuing Oral History Partnerships

Librarians and archivists are well positioned to use collaborations to build oral history collections. Universities offer a rich setting for possibilities for collaborating on oral history work, given the presence of faculty in a variety of fields who can suggest directions for oral history documentation projects and potential interviewees or can involve their students in conducting interviews or participating in other ways. Engaging in such projects—which are highly attuned to local settings, cultures, and context—provides valuable means for a library and indeed its parent university to distinguish themselves from others, generate valuable new scholarship, and demonstrate to the local community that higher education cares about and is valuable to them.

Reaching out to faculty, formally or informally at social interactions, can pay dividends—it helps to have an "elevator appeal" handy, like the one mentioned above. It pays to be alert to research underway, among both faculty and students (in particular graduate students), to help identify topics that could lend themselves to making contact with potential oral history interviewees. This can also be beneficial for soliciting interviews, recordings, and related material already produced by scholars in the course of their research. Librarians and archivists have a real advantage here, being on the front line of research at their institutions.

Such connections within the university can lead to referrals to individuals with a special connection to a particular group or community ripe for oral history interviewing, someone like Caroline Simpson with the Qurnawis. People like these can be identified in other ways, met at events (such as lectures on related topics) outside the university, through media reports, or via internet venues or social media postings. A good partner will have close contacts with and a deep understanding of a community or certain kinds of interviewees (as with University on the Square participants who identified worthwhile interviewees beyond AUC). But the key to real success is their dedication to documenting that group.

Be prepared for setbacks, even with the best of partners. In our case, a faculty member of Armenian descent, who spoke the language and was a scholar of the Armenian diaspora—in other words the perfect partner—pursued interviews with members of that community in Cairo, but a number of the potential interviewees she met with were

simply too reluctant to make recordings due to their status as members of a minority. Don't be discouraged, as often when one door closes another opens, as with our experience with the Jewish community in Cairo. Their population has dwindled to such small numbers that the prospects for a major oral history project with locals are slim, but in reaching out to community leaders we have been able to engage with those studying the diaspora of those who left Egypt, with possibilities for acquiring already-conducted interviews with those individuals.

Collaborations do take time to establish, define, and nurture. A partnership distributes the load of the effort between the librarian and his or her partner, but a project can still be costly in terms of time in a job where responsibilities continually mount. This can require compromises—as much as we would like to, we simply can't do it all. In the case of AUC's Archives, pursuing oral history as a main area of emphasis led us to deemphasize archival processing to some extent, limiting the detail with which we organize and describe some collections. We moved in this direction due to the possibilities we saw in oral history for preserving Egypt's and AUC's heritage and the emergence of documentation opportunities like the 2011 revolution and the link with Qurna. Both we and our partners recognized that, without pursuing oral history, important voices would be silenced, their wisdom lost to coming generations.

By their very nature—their mission of service and the wide variety of users they support—libraries are fertile ground for collaborations. Even for oral history on a small scale, at AMICAL institutions and elsewhere, they can be places where librarians or archivists join their expertise with the contacts and knowledge that faculty and community insiders can offer. At its heart, oral history involves a partnership, a speaker, and a listener, and by developing partnerships libraries can ensure that those voices are heard long into the future.

Notes

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