

FIAF Oral History Project

Guidelines for Interviewers

Planning and Research

When you contact a potential interviewee, explain to them that this is for the FIAF Oral History Project. Inevitably, people will talk about themselves and their own organisations, but they should be reminded that this should be from the point of view of the relationship with FIAF and other FIAF members.

Ask the potential interviewee if there's anyone they'd particularly like to be interviewed by. There should always be someone from the participating Archive, but former colleagues, colleagues from other archives, or even personal friends could all be involved if it was thought that this would offer a more relaxed and productive interview. The ideal number of interviewers is two, never only one. More than two begins to be unwieldy but might be appropriate in certain circumstances.

Ask the potential interviewee what language they would prefer to be interviewed in. Though it would be advantageous if he or she felt completely confident and competent in one of FIAF's official languages, this might, for example, rule out a preferred interviewer. Interviews will eventually be translated anyway, so whether this is to two official languages or to three is not such an issue.

Agree a convenient and suitable venue for the interview. Offices are not relaxing places. The interviewee might well feel more comfortable in their own home, for example, but you should be confident that it will be quiet.

Make it clear to the interviewee, right from the start, that copyright in the interview, whether as a verbal record or in transcription and/or translation, resides with FIAF. However, if anyone wanted to publish the interview, particularly in some edited form, the interviewee should certainly be offered the chance to read the version to be published before it appeared in print.

A list of suggested basic questions can be found below. Send these – and any others particularly relevant to this person – to the interviewee before you meet them so that they can be prepared with the right answers.

Ask the interviewee if they could look out any memorabilia they might have. Photographs, for example, are good for jogging memories.

Make sure you have as much information as you can get in advance of any interview. Though this might seem to be putting the cart before the horse, it sometimes helps to lead people into better recollection if you can ask them questions. For example:

- Call colleagues or former colleagues and ask them if there's anything they've heard about which they think is interesting or which needs clarification, etc.
- Make a list of names of people you know worked at the interviewee's Archive – particularly in "external liaison" activities generally, or who were specialist in disciplines represented by one of the Commissions – so that you can ask about them if they're not mentioned spontaneously by the interviewee.
- Find out what you can about any Congresses hosted by the interviewee's Archive, dates and discussion topics, special speakers, etc.

Equipment Checklist

You'll need:

A digital audio recorder which

- has sufficient memory to take several hours of interview at a speed that provides good audio reproduction,
- will plug in to a computer so that the digital file can be easily forwarded,
- can run recordings backwards (as well as forwards) a few words at a time as this will be essential for easy transcription.

If this latter facility is not available on your recorder, you'll need transcription equipment, or at least be sure of having access to such equipment.

Spare batteries.

A back-up recorder if possible.

A digital camera could be useful not just for taking a picture of the interviewee but might also enable you to copy any memorabilia to illustrate the website.

List of basic questions

List of names

List of FIAF Congresses – cities and topics of the symposia

Preparing for the Interview

Inform the interviewee if there are any last-minute changes proposed – if one of the designated interviewers has to drop out, for example – in case this makes a difference to their willingness to be interviewed.

Make sure your recorder is working properly – change batteries, take a spare battery with you. Take a spare recorder if you can.

Check your digital camera.

Go through (and add to, if appropriate) this list of basic questions which will help provide standard information for each interview.

- Name of Archive
- Date of founding
- Date joined FIAF
- Name of first curator, other staff/positions at the time
- Names of other important officers
- Names of any other FIAF member organisations in the country
- Dates interviewee worked at the Archive
- Interviewee's background/education
- Position(s) held by interviewee
- Any special field of interest in the Archive
- Any publications by interviewee, whether articles or books
- Dates of other important events
- Position of organisation at foundation (division of another? Independent?)
- Position today (dates of changes?)
- "Political" situation at joining, e.g., was there opposition from a parent body
- Has this situation changed?
- Functions of organisation at foundation
- Functions today (dates of changes?)
- Funding sources
- Relations with other archives
- Preservation collaboration
- Print loans
- Print borrowing
- Anything particular the interviewee hoped to achieve with or for FIAF
- Anything particular the interviewee believes FIAF has accomplished
- Other
- Special relationships/Regional groups

Interviewees who have been involved with Commissions should be asked all the above but in addition:

- Name of Commission
- Role of interviewee
- Dates interviewee was connected with Commission
- What was the interviewee's particular role within the Commission
- Names of Commission officers/members during this period
- Activities of Commission
- Interaction with other archives

The Interview

Check the equipment (again!). Turn off mobile phones. See if the interviewee would be willing to turn off their house phone. Check for noisily ticking or striking clocks – remove them if possible.

Interviewees may well have opinions about the effectiveness (or otherwise) of FIAF's activities and/or officers during the years they were connected with it. These opinions should be sought, of course, but some people will be reluctant to talk against former colleagues who are still living. They may be persuaded if they are aware that, while all the information will eventually reside on the FIAF website where it can all be accessed by authorised enquirers, nonetheless, it is possible to place embargoes on access to a full interview until a specified date, and to permit access to only an edited version of any transcript for the same period. Interviewers must remember that they are not allowed to pass on anything they hear that the interviewee may wish to keep confidential.

Before beginning to ask any questions, it is essential that you log basic identification information verbally at the beginning of the recording in one of FIAF's three official languages. Give the following details:

“FIAF Oral History Project”

“Interview with -----”

“On (date)”

“At (venue)”

“By ----- and -----”

“Interview conducted in (language)”

“The interviewee has been advised that copyright in this recording and its transcripts and translations resides with the International Federation of Film Archives.”

And make sure that the interviewee hears you saying this last sentence!

Ask the basic questions from the list above as well as any others you believe help clarify anything about the interviewee's Archive, as well as the interviewee's own role in that Archive and vis à vis the organisational and personal relationship with FIAF.

Ideally, after that, an interviewer should say as little as possible, allowing the interviewee free rein, and subject only to whatever prompting is necessary to elicit information on topics you've come up with during your researches. Try not to comment audibly – nod your head to indicate understanding or agreement, for example, unless you really have to be drawn into discussion for a few seconds.

Some interviewees are indefatigable. Others get tired. Be aware of this and, if necessary, suggest postponing the rest of the interview to another date.

After the Interview

Forward a copy of the recording to the FIAF Secretariat, with a note of the information (as above) that identifies it.

Store a copy of the recording locally.

Arrange for a transcript to be made at the earliest opportunity. This is not only useful for access, but also to translators. Make sure you read this carefully to correct spellings of names, etc.

The final text, marked as FIAF copyright, should be forwarded to the Secretariat. It is helpful to provide a good summary of the interview as well – name of interviewee, Archive, period covered, particular points of interest, etc., etc.

Give a copy of the audio recording and/or the transcript to the interviewee. Be prepared to get comments or requests to have certain parts deleted. If appropriate, try to persuade the interviewee that the interview should remain as recorded.

Identify someone in your own country who can translate the interview into any or all of FIAF's three official languages. This person could be a professional translator, or should at least be bi-lingual, but should ideally have some knowledge of archives and archiving as well. The texts, marked as FIAF copyright, should be forwarded to the Secretariat as they become available.

It is hoped that each Archive can take responsibility for arranging and for paying for transcription and translation.