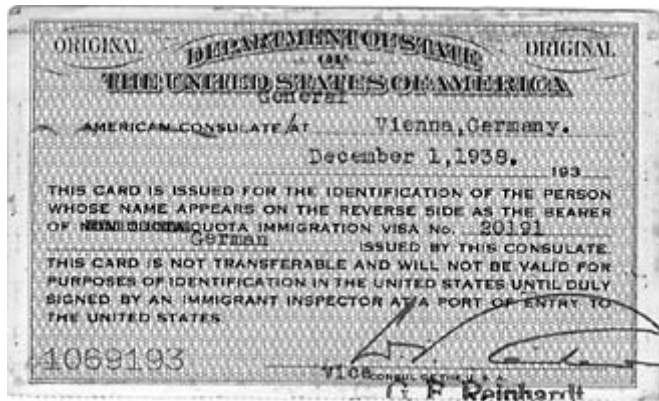


Cyberspatial Monuments of Memory

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Photos: Leo Glückselig

1998, after more than 100,000 hours of interviews, a project initiated by Steven Spielberg will make this collection accessible to the public on-line.

The Idea — A Virtual Museum of Shoah Survivors

Director Steven Spielberg has made available the entire box office profit of the film "Schindler's List" to finance the most comprehensive video documentation project ever carried out. He and the others involved in the project's development in 1994 set a clear goal: "to videotape as many Holocaust survivor testimonies as possible." [2] Fifty years after the end of the National Socialist reign of terror, it is already very late — the time has run out for generations of survivors born before 1895 — but it is not too late. It is clear to everyone, though, that there is no more time to waste. The ambitious project is planning to conduct interviews with 50,000 of the estimated 300,000 victims of the Holocaust still living throughout the world. The project's target group consists of Jews and all those who were persecuted under the National Socialist racial laws, such as individuals who had long before left the Jewish religion or their children brought up in another religion, and children of so-called mixed marriages. It was subsequently decided to also conduct interviews with homosexuals as well as Roma and Sinti, groups which have been accorded too little attention up to now by historians working on National Socialism. Human beings who risked their lives to protect the persecuted will also be included in the documentation project.

Were it not for the advanced techniques and progressive ideas for which Stephen Spielberg has been a leading proponent, the project would not function as it does with the latest technologies for video recording, conservation and data accessibility. Each interview, averaging slightly less than two hours, is filmed with a Beta SP video camera and is thus suitable for television. The cassettes are sent to Los Angeles, the project's headquarters, where several copies are made from each tape: a VHS version is sent to the interviewee, another is catalogued and a Betacam copy serves as a backup. Moreover, the interview is saved to a computer-accessible digital video library system. The *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History* Project has thus been a beneficiary of technological breakthroughs in data storage, having received, along with other generous contributions, a \$1.3 Million grant from Silicon Graphics. Thousands of hours of filmed recollections can be digitally archived and, with the help of a supercomputer, made accessible to users.

All interviews are preserved and compiled by the project's staff into an index containing names of persons and places, testimony and 12,000 keywords. The process of indexing will enable viewers to get oriented and to quickly find their way through the enormous quantity of material according to their own individual needs. The index items are linked to digitized entries so that users will be able to call up interactive passages of video recordings, graphics and text at their own discretion. The entire unedited interview can also be viewed.

From the perspective of the viewer, it is precisely this direct access to individual, viewer-selected interview passages that constitutes the difference to previous oral history and video projects. In the past, locating these passages on tape was a time-consuming process; now, with the help of digitalization, they can be called up instantly. This method of access to audio and film documents is certainly familiar already to the many visitors to museums equipped with CD-ROM stations. Access to such an extensive body of information, however, goes far beyond anything found in the realm of museum pedagogy.

Access to the on-line archive, however, will be limited to the visitors to individual institutions which are specifically dedicated to memorializing the Holocaust, such as Yad Vashem in

Jerusalem, the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington.

And You? Who are you? What exactly do you want to know? Are you yourself a survivor, hoping, perhaps, even now, to learn something about someone you once knew? You can enter a search subject name directly through the screen and will learn immediately whether this person is mentioned and by whom.

Are you a child of Holocaust survivors wishing to see how others went on with their lives and started new families in spite of the tremendous burdens of the past? Maybe observing others will help you to better understand your parents if they were never willing or able to speak about what they had gone through.

Or are there members of your family who were Nazis involved in the Holocaust? Do you want to know what human beings forced to suffer under the terror of such individuals have to report about them?

If, for example, you come from Klagenfurt in the Austrian province of Carinthia, you might look up whether one of the interviewees lived in your area up until the time of National Socialism. You'll find, among others, the name Walter Friedländer, who was born in Klagenfurt in 1922 and in 1938 succeeded in fleeing to Palestine, where he survived on a kibbutz. If your only interest is in the time of Nazi persecution, then you can select only those relevant passages from the interview. In case you have more time and want to know more about this person, you can view the entire interview and learn why Walter Friedländer returned to Europe.

Perhaps you are an African-American confronting the issue of oppression during the time of slavery, and hoping to be able to develop a better mutual understanding through a study of the history of persecution of other ethnic groups. You might be particularly interested, for instance, to hear about survivors who were able to find refuge in Africa and were held for years by the English in an African internment camp.

Or you live in the year 2132 and you wish to get an historically distanced glimpse into this sad chapter of human history. There will be no one still alive who knew someone who actually had to undergo this hell of persecution. What questions might you then pose?

Whoever you are, as soon as you have made the decision to open one of these biographical doors, interactive media will enable you to specify what you want to see and hear. Which doors will you open? You won't know it until you are actually seated before the video monitor and can enter search parameters which you'll use to get oriented within the 100,000 hours of oral biographies. In one respect, it's a numbers game: working daily, an individual would need 40 years to view this archive of remembrance in its entirety — or 91 years, working three hours a day. This play with numbers may certainly sound fantastic, but it has nothing to do with the way human beings orient themselves in the "Post-Information Age" — they search through gigantic masses of available information out of which they create small, manageable units. [3]

Global Education

"What message or warning do you have now, approximately 50 years after the end of the war, for your children, grandchildren and for the whole world?" This is one of the suggestions

made for the final question of the interview. A question directed toward the "whole world" would have been inadmissible and exaggerated if posed by a practitioner of oral history until now. The fact that these interviews can be called up on several continents, however, imbues this question with a deeper significance. The answers to it will surely number among the most interesting segments of the interviews.

No prior historical project has been able to raise such a substantial claim: "The archive of survivors testimonies will be used as a tool of global education about the Holocaust and to teach racial, ethnic and cultural tolerance." [4]

There already exists a series of project guidelines for parents and teachers to enable them to prepare schoolchildren and students to work with the interviews as well as to guide them in coordinating the process of discussion and reflection afterwards. Users will be able to call up on screen not only interviews but also information about persecution in individual countries or in each of the concentration and extermination camps. The project places its hope in the power of information and enlightenment. Indeed, only the future will reveal whether the Holocaust can be grasped within a "global framework" of understanding. [5]

The Contents

The goal of the *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Project* is to allow the survivors to tell their life stories the way they themselves want to tell them. The task of the interviewer is to create an atmosphere conducive to this. The questions are oriented toward certain issues which constitute points of emphasis, such as Jewish communities before the Holocaust. About 20% of the interview is to be spent on life prior to the Nazis, 60% on the period of persecution and 20% on life afterwards. Furthermore, an ongoing process of learning and review is built into this highly professionally-designed project.

The Interviewers

The team of interviewers is composed of individuals representing a wide range of occupations and interests — for example, psychologists, journalists, scholars, survivors and children of survivors. Before being permitted to independently carry out interviews, all of the interviewers take part in a three-day training course conducted by a team consisting of historians and psychologists. Since, in many cases, the interviewees have suffered severe trauma, it is also particularly important to display sensitivity and awareness of the psychological effects. Often, the survivors will break down into tears, an expression of the pain recalled by the recollection of humiliation, torment and the loss of loved ones. Even for experienced interviewers, it is sometimes difficult to bear this experience — but they learn to deal with it.

Most of the interviewers are not professional historians; nevertheless, their training provides them with the capability of gathering information, preparing themselves adequately and conducting the interview in a sound manner. For instance, in preparation for the actual interview, it is helpful to schedule a "pre-interview" at which the interviewer can take down biographical data in writing and can get an idea of which situations and events he can expect to be confronted with later. The subsequent interview is then evaluated and the interviewer and the videographer receive highly detailed feedback which helps them to refine their methods.

The Perspective of the Interviewees

From the point of view of the interviewees, participation in this project seldom has global objectives but is rather concentrated much more strongly on their own families, which must also be taken into consideration. Thus, the interview offers the opportunity to recount the fate of individual family members. During the conversation, the camera remains concentrated upon the face of the interviewee. The interviewer can be seen only at the start of filming; thereafter, the testimony of the survivor occupies the center of attention. For the viewer, each story related opens a door to an actual life and a real fate. At the end of the interview, personal photographs and objects evoking remembrances are shown. One of the most beautiful ideas of the project is that, at the end of the interview, family members are invited on camera, introduced and given the opportunity to say a few personal words about the interviewee. It is very moving to watch the family gather together, showing that the survivor was able to start a new life. But there are also survivors for whom nothing remains from the past but the memories themselves. They lost everything — no relatives, no friends, no photos, no souvenirs. Some are alone and lonely, some have absolutely no family. With their memories, they construct at least a monument for those who were murdered, for those who cannot speak for themselves.

The realization of the project's goals can only be insured through the help of committed volunteer staff members and the survivors themselves. The survivors are kept fully informed about the project. If they consent to be interviewed, a proposal is made of an individual to act as interviewer, whom the interviewee may choose to reject. The interviewer is also similarly queried. I know of no other project that displays such enormous consideration in interactions with all those involved.

The Object

There already exist important institutions dedicated to the personal remembrance of survivors — foremost among these are the extensive archives of audio interviews at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and at the New York Research Foundation for Jewish Immigration. [6] The Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University in New Haven, CT has been going about the task of compiling video interviews with Holocaust survivors since 1979, and is one of the institutions which will be provided with on-line access to the *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Archive*. To date, 3,500 video interviews have been conducted for Yale University; these can be viewed on video in the archive itself. [7] In contrast to the interviews for the *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Project*, those at Yale are conducted in an "open" fashion, leaving much more free latitude for the process of recollection. [8] The disadvantage for the untrained observer: memories tend to get disorderly and this can very quickly become trying. On the other hand, these interviews are especially valuable for scholars, since they take into account the two levels of recollection: so-called standardized and associative. The latter is possible only if the interview makes sufficient time available for associations. To put it another way, the strength of this type of interview lies in the pause. While interviews of this kind are of great significance for scholarship, they are hardly appropriate for viewers accustomed to mass media. [9]

The Computer Revolution has opened the possibility to save data in quantities never before imaginable and to conserve this material in completely new ways. Historical scholarship is and has always been characterized by gaps in knowledge, and historians have always had to orient themselves toward the sources of information that an age has left behind. Much has been lost: most of the perpetrators were too cowardly to tell their truth, and instead hid behind excuses, lied or remained silent. But the remembrance of the victims of Nazi persecution can preserve a world which the Nazis meant to destroy; the microcosm of Jewish communities in

Europe or the life of the Roma and Sinti. Only a small minority of survivors has been able to summon the energy to put its testimony down in writing. [10] The medium of video, however, provides them with the opportunity to preserve these still-painful memories for posterity, both for their immediate families and for future generations. This project is so terribly important for this reason alone. These priceless documents will constitute irreplaceable treasures for survivors' families, not to mention what they have to say to a global public.

I have already had to listen to the crudest forms of prejudice in conversations concerning the *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Project*. This is said to be such a typically American way of going about things — Shoah Business, as it were. Or, the interviewers are not competent. To even respond to the former charge would mean acknowledging arguments aimed below the belt. The latter objection is rather more serious, but it can be preliminarily refuted by posing another question in return: Where were the historians and intellectuals during the decades when it still would have been possible to carry on these important conversations with those generations which are unfortunately no longer alive now? This project will certainly not be able to replace the research efforts of other institutions but it will help to ensure the preservation of much valuable information, and the enormous data bank will offer scholars the chance to form important contacts. Those who ask what sense the *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Project* makes should ask themselves the question of why they ask.

The Collective Memory in Cyberspace

Collective memory is the manifestation of the past in time, in places, in documents — in that which remains. [11] The remembrance of the Holocaust manifested itself after World War II in many extremely different ways, beginning with the shocking photographs and films of the camps and the reports emerging from war crimes trials.

After the war, it took a great deal of time for the process of reflection to get underway. The horror was still too present; all those involved were consumed by the efforts to reestablish some sort of normality, which remained constantly overshadowed by an incomprehensible past. Events in politics and in the media provided a number of highly charged impulses — in particular, the trial in 1960-61 of one of those chiefly responsible for the efficient operation of the "final solution," Adolf Eichmann. The process of working out past events can never achieve complete closure in the face of the monstrosity of what took place. This is illustrated by the current examples of the extremely heated international discussions surrounding Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners* [12] or the bitter reactions in Germany and Austria to a museum exhibition detailing crimes committed by the Wehrmacht in Eastern Europe.

Memorial places and times of remembrance are still regarded as disruptive of the process of "normalization" yearned for in these countries. [13] Take, for example, the memorials in Vienna: the monument commemorating the victims standing on the site of the former Gestapo headquarters in Hotel Metropol is scarcely noticeable and most of its passers-by are speeding automobiles. Sculptor Alfred Hrdlicka's memorial depicting a Jew forced to scrub the streets in 1938 indeed occupies a prominent place opposite the Dorotheum; this place, however, much more strongly commemorates victims of the war and the language of form spoken by the monument itself refers to the victims of political persecution, while the figure of the Jew rather reproduces a cliché. Furthermore, with the insensitivity displayed in his rantings and ravings against East German author/musician Wolf Biermann, the sculptor himself has forfeited any moral entitlement to the creation of a symbol for Jewish victims. In the wake of

these unsatisfactory solutions, plans are in the works for another monument to be erected on Judenplatz and, thus, in another location of limited visibility.

In Israel and the USA, commemoration of the Holocaust manifests itself as a part of the national identity. On August 19, 1953, the place memorializing heroes and martyrs, Yad Vashem, was dedicated upon Jerusalem's Mount of Remembrance, also the site of Theodore Herzl's grave. This memorial is administered by, among others, the Israeli government, and the commemoration of the Shoah has become a central component of the legitimizing principle of the State of Israel. [14] In response to an initiative by President Carter, the U. S. Congress in 1980 authorized the establishment of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum which was opened in April 1993. The location of the museum is a place of national significance on the Mall between the Capitol and the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. [15] A comparable institution of commemoration, constituting a place of remembrance while simultaneously offering exhibitions, information and a program of continuing education, continues to be lacking in Germany and Austria. [16] Consequently, it is no wonder that the *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Project* has still not been able to find a suitable partner in these countries to whom they could make their on-line archive available.

Cyberspace is a new place of remembrance, one which is no longer bound to a single physical location. There are already numerous addresses related to the Holocaust to be found in Internet. [17] Nevertheless, the *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Project* will be accessible only from real places of remembrance. Alone the fact that these interviews must be protected from misuse makes this necessary — and also because it is appropriate to approach this archive of remembrance within a physical context that is dedicated to commemorating the Holocaust as well as to providing information about it. For these memorial places and their visitors, the archive of survivors' remembrance will open up new dimensions.

Why Do You Want to Open Doors?

Will you sit down in front of the video monitor because you want to understand how all this could have happened? It is necessary and legitimate to pose this question, but I suspect that you'll find no satisfactory answer to it. What will you see? Survivors, who recount how their lives lay in the hands of unpredictable men and women. You'll mostly see the victims, who describe what was done to them and how, despite it all, they managed to survive — through luck, coincidence, cleverness, chutzpah... These human beings will hardly be able to explain to you how others were suddenly transformed into informants, thieves, vicious spectators, potential murderers and beasts, since they will hardly be capable of comprehending it themselves.

"Anyone who attempts to depict mass extermination, scientifically or artistically, in books, plays, pictures or even in films, is condemned to failure." [18] Likewise, the *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Project* can not expect to be granted an appeal from this verdict. But it will leave behind the most comprehensive monument dedicated to commemorating the fate of those who were doomed. And with their remembrance, the survivors will erect a monument of testimony to those who were not able to survive.

Will you take the time to receive this personal remembrance of individual human beings? Will you — whoever you are and whenever you live — ask yourself how it could have come to this and how to make certain it never happens again? It's about time for us to find answers.

[1] Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory*, New York 1990, p. 172

- [2] See *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation*, World Wide Web, Home Page
- [3] Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital*, New York 1995, pp. 163ff
- [4] <http://www.vfh.org>
- [5] Saul Friedländer, *Memory, History and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, Bloomington — Indianapolis 1993, pp. 42-63
- [6] See Herbert A. Strauss [Ed.], *Jewish Immigrants of the Nazi Period in the U.S.A.*, Vol. 3, No. 1
- [7] See <http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/homepage.html>
- [8] Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies. The Ruins of Memory*, New Haven — London 1991
- [9] *Guide to Yale University Library Holocaust Video Testimonies*, 1994. This contains summaries of 567 video interviews. The catalog can also be called up through Internet.
- [10] One of the most extensive archives, containing approximately 1,000 written accounts, is that of the Leo Baeck Institute in New York.
- [11] See Maurice Halbwachs, *Das kollektive Gedächtnis*, Nördlingen 1985; Pierre Nora, *Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis*, Berlin 1990, pp. 11ff
- [12] Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners. Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, New York 1996
- [13] See the articles by Wolfgang Benz and Reinhold Gärtner on "institutionalized memory" in the FRG and Austria in: Werner Bergmann/Rainer Erb/Albert Lichtblau [Eds.], *Schwieriges Erbe. Der Umgang mit Nationalsozialismus und Antisemitismus in Österreich, der DDR und der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, Frankfurt - New York 1995; Barbara Schöllenger/Sigrid Steininger, *Denkmal und Erinnerung*, Vienna 1993; Sybil Milton, *In Fitting Memory. The Art and Politics of Holocaust Memorials*, Detroit 1991; *Orte der Erinnerung 1945 bis 1955* [Dachauer Hefte, Vol. 11, No. 11], Dachau 1995; James E. Young [Ed.], *Mahnmale des Holocaust. Motive, Rituale und Stätten des Gedenkens*, Munich 1994; Edgar Bamberger [Ed.], *Der Völkermord an den Sinti und Roma in der Gedenkstättenarbeit*, Heidelberg 1994
- [14] Saul Friedländer, *Die Shoah als Element in der Konstruktion israelischer Erinnerung*, in *Babylon. Beiträge zur jüdischen Gegenwart*, Vol. 2, July 1987, pp. 10-22
- [15] <http://www.ushmm.org/>; also see Edward T. Linenthal, *Preserving Memory. The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum*, New York 1995
- [16] The Documentation Archive of the Austrian Resistance has indeed performed important groundbreaking work, to which the Jewish Museum of Vienna constitutes a significant complement. Nevertheless, a Holocaust memorial concerned with reaching a wide public and which takes advantage of all possibilities offered by information and exhibition technology is still lacking in Austria, as is also the case in Germany.
- [17] Yahoo, for example, listed 199 entries "Shoah" and 75 under "Holocaust" on June 4, 1996.
- [18] Doron Rabinovici, *Das Verbot der Bilder oder Sichtweise und Anschauung*, in: *IWK-Mitteilungen*, 4/1995, p. 3
- [19] *Past Forward. The Newsletter of the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation*, April/May 1996