Editorial

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Oral History and the Holocaust – An Introduction

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During the Second World War, the Soviet writers and journalists Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman collected and processed eyewitness accounts of crimes against the Jews, thus making one of the first oral history studies of the Holocaust, known as *The Black Book*. In 2006, the premiere of the documentary "Spell Your Name" took place in Kyiv. It was created in cooperation with the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, and the Victor Pinchuk Foundation, and is dedicated to the events of the Holocaust in Ukraine. In making the film, director Sergey Bukovsky used previously collected testimonies and new interviews recorded during his trips in Ukraine. Thus, viewers had the opportunity to observe the actual field collection of the Holocaust Oral History.

Today oral history, and genres of testimonies and life stories, are central to the research field of Holocaust studies, and to how we remember and commemorate the victims of the Holocaust. Even while the Holocaust was being carried out, historians and others, in ghettos and all over occupied Eastern Europe, collected testimonies and conduct interviews in order to document what was going on, but also so that someone in the future could write their history. The events of the Holocaust are reflected in the numerous memoirs of rescued victims and witnesses of Nazi crimes. The collection, systematization, and study of personal memories are the main tasks of oral history in this field. Such collections allow us to hear people's voices, to take into account individual experiences of life in the context of genocide, and to complement the general social and historical context of events.

Collections of oral history on the Holocaust include thousands of early testimonies and life stories archived in, for example, Yad Vashem, and in the form of audio-visual collections initiated in later years, such as those collected by or for the

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Institute for Visual History and Education USC Shoah Foundation, The Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Yahad-In Unum and other institutions.

History cannot be written without archives or sources. Nor can history be written without historians. We hardly lack sources from and about those who were murdered during the Holocaust, nor from those who survived Nazi persecution. The collection of testimonies initiated while the Holocaust was going on or immediately after the Holocaust was done by historians who hoped that historians in the future would write about what had happened. Their hope was shared by many others. In an article from 2001, British historian Tony Kushner wrote "[t]here are now over 100,000 Jewish testimonies collected – in written, oral, and video form – perhaps the largest total gathered on one specific historical subject. Yet if tremendous energies and resources have been put into preserving the memories of survivors, less thought and time has been given to the use of this material."[1] Tony Kushner's article was published, in the British Oral History Society's journal *Oral History*.

In the years after the Second World War and Holocaust, the research fields of Holocaust studies and oral history emerged, but seldom walked hand in hand. Commissions and institutions were established during and immediately after the war to collect and record testimonies and memories from the persecuted and survivors. Latvian-American professor of psychology David Boder travelled to Europe to interview survivors in the displaced persons camps. He, like many early collectors, had difficulty finding publishers who were interested in the testimonies he collected.[2] Writing about and from a British context, Kushner argued that the post-war social science was more interested in collecting and disseminating hard quantitative data and objective facts, than documenting and researching subjective life stories, "which led to a (…) at best patronizing and, at worst, a hostile approach to survivors" in historical studies.[3] There is, of course, a big difference between the collections made during and immediately after the Holocaust by the persecuted and the survivors themselves, and later collections made by scholars, even if some of these scholars also were Holocaust survivors, such as those at the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, initiated in the end of the 1970s.

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1 Tony Kushner, "Oral History at the Extremes of Human Experience: Holocaust Testimony in a Museum Setting", *Oral History*, Autumn, 2001, vol. 29, no. 2, *Hidden Histories*, pp. 83–94.

2 Alan Rosen, *The Wonder of Their Voices: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews of David Boder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

3 Kushner, 2001, p. 85.

One can also argue that there also is a difference between 'testimonial' collections and oral history collections, and that a survivor's testimony and a survivor's life stories are two different genres.[4] But one could also argue that there are similarities. Many testimonies include recollections of the life before the Holocaust, and many oral or written life stories include testimonies of what happened to the survivor, and to the survivors' family, relatives, friends, communities, etc. Scholars such as Hannah Pollin-Galay have also pointed out that within the genre of testimonies there are elements of differences: differences which arise from the language and the location of testimony.[5] We would also like to add one more component: time. What matters is not only when the testimony is given, but how it is recontextualized and reactivated at different times is also of importance. The collections that we use as Holocaust scholars and Holocaust historians today were created for differing reasons. David Boder, as mentioned above, travelled to the displaced persons camps in Europe to record interviews with Holocaust survivors. His purpose was to study how the impact of the catastrophe affected the survivors' psyche, and he was looking for "human documents that would reveal psychological truths."[6] Alan Rosen writes that even though the Boder interviews have been retrospectively and understandably attached to the discipline of oral history, Boder himself did not define his work as oral history.[7]

In the immediate period after the war and the Holocaust, there were psychologists, teachers, and social workers who collected and interviewed survivors in order to study their mental health and the consequences of their trauma. Other early collecting initiatives were made to create testimonies and documents to be used in trials against the perpetrators. Also, some scholars, both from the discipline of literature and the discipline of history, argued that re-telling, writing and witnessing the Holocaust were related to Jewish traditions and knowledge productions from

4 American psychologist and Holocaust scholar Henry Greenspan has, for example, questioned the very concept of testimony itself; contending that the act of listening to Holocaust survivors never involves the extraction of truth from living subjects, but rather constitutes a dialogic exchange through which the interviewer and interviewee find new ways of knowing and learning together. Greenspan's thinking has not only inspired Holocaust studies, but has also had a major impact on the practices of oral historians. For further readings see Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust survivors: Beyond testimony* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2010); Kobi Kabalek and Henry (Hank) Greenspan, "An Interview with Henry 'Hank' Greenspan", *The Journal of Holocaust Research*, 2024. vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 74–86; Henry 'Hank' Greenspan in conversation with Malin Thor Tureby on Sharing Authority' as 'Learning Together': *Oral History*, 2024, vol. 52, no. 1, pp. 109–116.

5 Hannah Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing: Language, Place, and Holocaust Testimony* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019).

6 Alan Rosen, *The Wonder of their Voices: The 1945 Holocaust Interviews of David Boder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. IX.

7 Ibid.

before the Holocaust.[8] The French Historian and Holocaust scholar Annette Wieviorka famously argued that the "era of the witness" began in the 1960s, when the witness became a public figure, beginning with the Eichmann Trial, followed by an increasingly systematic collection of audiovisual testimonies. One could argue that the "era of the witness" has had multiple beginnings, and that "the witness" has had many different roles in the public, in various times and places. From the 1970s onward we can also discover an interest in interviewing survivors of the Holocaust starting to expand beyond Jewish memory institutions, and being taken up by more general oral history and cultural heritage institutions.[9]

The preparation and publication of this issue takes place in the second year of the Russian Federation's full-scale war against Ukraine, and the tenth year of aggression in Ukraine, as well as within a year of the atrocities committed by Hamas against Israelis on 7 October 2023. These events will certainly affect Holocaust studies in Ukraine, Israel, and worldwide, in particular in the collection and processing of oral history. Ukrainian researchers of the Holocaust have witnessed or been victims

8 A growing number of Holocaust scholars have started to research early and later collecting initiatives. See for example: Boaz Cohen, *Israeli Holocaust research: Birth and evolution* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015); Victoria Van Orden Martínez, *Afterlives: Jewish and Non-Jewish Polish Survivors of Nazi Persecution in Sweden Documenting Nazi Atrocities, 1945–1946* (Linköping: Linköping University Press, 2023); Malin Thor Tureby, "Memories, Testimonies and Oral History. On Collections and Research about and with Holocaust Survivors in Sweden", SOU 2020:21, *Utredningen om ett museum om Förintelsen: Sveriges museum om Förintelsen*. Del 2 (Stockholm, Norstedts juridik, 2020); Zoë Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust. Identity, testimony, representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Madeline White, "A Museological Approach to Collecting Oral Histories: A Case Study of the Holocaust Collections at the Imperial War Museum", *The Journal of Holocaust Research*, 2019, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 138–156.

9 Between 1987 and 2000 the project Living Memory of the Jewish Community was run by National Life Stories at the British Library, which gathered over 180 life story interviews with Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and their children in the UK. Jewish Survivors of the Holocaust – an online collection of over 280 in-depth Holocaust survivors' testimonies: https://blogs.bl.uk/sound-and-vision/2015/01/jewish-survivors-of-the-holocaust-an-online-collection-of-over-280-in-depth-holocaust-survivors-test.html. Accessed 6 February 2024. In Sweden the project *Jewish Memories* was run between 1994 and 1998 by the Nordic Museum. It gathered over 400 written and oral life stories from the Jewish minority in Sweden, including testimonies from Holocaust survivors. See: Malin Thor Tureby, "To Hear with the Collection: The Contextualisation and Recontextualisation of Archived Interviews", *Oral History*, 2013, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 63–74. See also: Madeline White, "A Contextual Analysis of Holocaust Oral Testimony in Britain and Canada", PhD thesis in History, Royal Holloway University of London, September 2020.

of war crimes; some have joined the military; others have joined teams documenting the crimes of the Russian army, and so on.

In the fall of 2022, in an interview with the famous British lawyer and researcher Philip Sands, the Ukrainian writer and public figure Victoria Amelina drew attention to the need to collect timely testimonies from witnesses to war and crimes. On 1 July 2023 she died of injuries inflicted by a Russian missile attack on 27 June on a public cafe in Kramatorsk, one of the cities where she was documenting war crimes.[10]

Today, members of the Ukrainian Oral History Association are reflecting on the topic of documenting testimonies about the Russian-Ukrainian war and the state of oral history in general, including ethical challenges for researchers trying to prevent retraumatization while collecting testimony from witnesses.[11]

The current process of working with witnesses is often intertwined with the interests of criminal investigators to use the evidence collected in future trials, and the desire to preserve the memory of the events and their participants. Certain initiatives, such as The Reckoning Project, have already declared their intention not only to facilitate the investigation, but also to ensure that the stories of war victims are not forgotten after the war is over.[12] The relevant work is coordinated through the Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine, where the Coordination Center for Victims and Witnesses has been operating since 2023.[13] At the same time, some non-governmental organizations that collect oral history about the Holocaust are finding new motivation to continue their work even in times of war. For example, the project "After the Silence," whose employees note: "Why is it important? Because there are few people who witnessed the events of World War II. Our oldest narrator is 101 years old. People of this age are gradually passing away, including as a result of this war – because of stress, worries about their grandchildren who volunteer or work in critical infrastructure."[14]

Thus, a lot is being done today to ensure that the individual experiences of war victims are effectively used in investigative actions and remain in the focus of public

10 Uilleam Blacker, "Victoria Amelina obituary", *The Guardian*, 7 July 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/07/victoria-amelina-obituary Accessed 6 February 2024.

11 International scientific conference UAUI-2024. https://oralhistory.com.ua Accessed 6 February 2024.

12 The Reckoning Project. https://www.thereckoningproject.com/mission Accessed 6 February 2024.

13 Office of the Prosecutor General of Ukraine. https://www.gp.gov.ua/ua/posts/stan-castinoyu-komandi-koordinaciinogo-centru-pidtrimki-poterpilix-i-svidkiv-ogoloseno-nabir-na-vakantni-posadi Accessed 6 February 2024.

14 Yana Radchenko, "After the Silence: How Oral Testimonies about the Holocaust are Collected in Ukraine". In ZMINA, 2023. https://zmina.info/news/pislya-tyshi-yak-v-ukrayini-zbyrayut-usni-svidchennya-pro-golokost1/?fbclid=IwAR1fgSuE8QbuypqKPYAe8F72iMDhdmlJfURhGAE17QwSuRY_7YSxC807qO4 Accessed 6 February 2024.

discussion and memory. Recalling the underutilization of Holocaust victims, survivors' and witnesses' testimonies, we realize that this approach has not always been successful. At the same time, it is also essential to collect and preserve the memory of past tragedies, especially the stories of older people who may have experienced several such shocks. In the study of oral history in Ukraine in the last decade under Russian aggression, there is a tendency for topics and epochs to overlap in the memories of witnesses.

A landmark event in the field of oral history in Ukraine was the publication of a collection of research papers edited by Gelinada Hrinchenko "Listening, Hearing, Understanding: Oral History of Ukraine in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries." The third section of the publication, entitled "Endless Memory, Inexhaustible Plots: New Heroes and New Parallels of Military Histories," includes articles by Andriy Usach and Dmytro Taranenko. Usach's contribution addresses the complicity of the local population of western Ukraine during the Holocaust, while Taranenko focused on the stories of witnesses to World War II who later experienced Russian aggression and the events in eastern Ukraine since 2014. In 2024, these and other topics are to be discussed at the International Scientific Conference of the Ukrainian Oral History Association entitled "Oral History in Wartime: Scientific Knowledge and Researcher Responsibility." We expect that this will contribute to the establishment of academic ethical standards for the creation and use of oral history sources in Ukraine.

Collecting testimonies from the ongoing war in Ukraine and in the aftermath of the Hamas attack on Israelis on 7 October 2023 are examples of what today is referred to as crisis collection.[15] As we have argued elsewhere, crisis documentation raises many different ethical dilemmas. Questions that we need to ask ourselves as scholars are if people really want us to document them during times of crisis? And if so, how would they like to be documented, recorded, and represented? As professional historians, we think it is important to collect, record and create sources for future historians to work with. But do all people really want their personal or collective experience or trauma to be "collected?" Maybe some people prefer to document and interpret what happened to them on their own terms before they are ready to share their experience with a scholar?[16] Ethical issues such as these have been

15 The USC Shoah Foundation has, for example, collected and published testimonies from October 7 as part of their Contemporary Antisemitism Collection: https://sfi.usc.edu/october7testimonies Accessed 6 February 2024.

16 These questions were raised by one of the guest editors in another forum: *The Oral History Review*, "Author Interview: Malin Thor Tureby on Crisis Documentation", https://oralhistoryreview.org/ohr-authors/author-interview-malin-thor-tureby-on-crisis-documentation/ Accessed 6 February 2024. See also: Malin Thor Tureby and Kristin Wagrell, "Crisis Documentation and Oral History: Problematizing Collecting and Preserving Practices in a Digital World", *The Oral History Review*, 2022, vol. 49, no. 2, pp. 346–376.

incorporated into the guidelines of international and national oral history associations. The Oral History Association, for example, states as one of its core principles that interviewers should "(…) conduct themselves ethically and thoughtfully and be vigilant about the possible consequences to narrators and their communities of both the interview process and the access/use of completed interviews."[17]

We must, of course, follow the ethical guidelines and the laws on research ethics to protect so-called vulnerable communities and individuals from harm. Returning to the statement from Tony Kushner about the fact that there are now over 100,000 Jewish testimonies collected on the Holocaust, but much less thought and time has been given to the use of this material, we would also like to raise the point that there is another ethical problem with asking people to talk about their trauma or experiences during wars and crises and then putting them into an archive and not using their testimonies, oral histories or other accounts in scholarly work or exhibitions. The non-use of collected materials can be experienced as a way of silencing or ignoring the voices of the marginalized, the victims and the survivors (often referred to as vulnerable groups).

The contributors to this collection reflect on or illustrate how some of the collected and archived interviews can be used in new research and teaching projects. Two of the contributors here, Stefania Sezza and Dana Eglits, have reactivated and used archived interviews from various institutions.

Stefania Sezza works with interviews with women who were liberated from Ravensbrück. Her sources are both interviews that were conducted by David Boder and interviews that were collected in 1945 and 1946 in Sweden by the Polish Research Institute in Lund. Sezza seeks to identify the common patterns and the crucial events which constitute the core of the interviewees' narration and representation of the events.

Daina Eglitis uses women survivors' interviews and memoirs from the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies (Fortunoff), the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum interview collection (USHMM) and USC Shoah Foundation Institute Visual History Archive (VHA), as well as testimonies from smaller Holocaust centers in Canada and Europe. In her article "Women's Experiences of Life Force Atrocities in the Baltic Ghettos, 1941–1944" (that by mistake was published in a previous issue),[18] Eglitis demonstrates how women's testimonies and memoirs reveal underrecognized gendered components of the early years of the Holocaust in Eastern

17 Oral History Association (OHA) https://oralhistory.org/oha-core-principles/ Accessed 6 February 2024. See also: International Oral History Association (IOHA) for further readings on ethical principles and guidelines: https://www.ioha.org/resources/ethics-and-copyrights/ Accessed 6 February 2024.

18 *Eastern European Holocaust Studies. Interdisciplinary Journal of the BYHMC*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 521–549.

Europe. Her study shows women's unique experiences and traumas related to pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, and sexual violence that may not be visible in other accounts.

Ornit Barkai is a documentary filmmaker who does not use archived collections with Holocaust survivor testimonies, but reaches to her own documentary film experiences to explore the ways in which oral history might be used, while reflecting on aspects of testimony, memory and post-memory. In the article, "Past Forward: Holocaust Testimony in Documentary Film," the roles of the author – as a researcher, filmmaker, and Holocaust survivors' daughter – are intertwined.

Two pieces in this special issue delve into teaching using survivor testimonies. The article by **Chad S.A. Gibbs**, "Holocaust Legacies and Oral History in the Classroom," raises questions about working with the aftermath of the Holocaust and the oral testimonies of survivors in the educational process. The author shares his personal experience as an educator and researcher in the United States.

Thibault Courcelle, **Ygal Fijalkow** and **Sandrine Victor's** work is related to one of the most important collections of oral history about the Holocaust, which was assembled by the staff of Yahad-In Unum. In their article, "Introducing Research Through Oral Surveys: French Students Meet Witnesses of the Holocaust by Bullets" they discuss pedagogical and academic aspects of working with the collection. In particular, the authors share their experience of involving students in field research, and evaluate the results of such involvement.

In her article, "An Interactive Biography of the Survivor or a Survivor's Hologram? Novel Methods of Collecting Holocaust Oral Testimony and Their Determinants," **Sylvia Papier** discusses the USC Shoah Dimensions in Testimony project initiated and implemented by the USC Shoah Foundation as a new collection of oral history. Papier argues that the project is bound to shape the future of Holocaust testimony and oral history itself and investigates if and how the project might work as a post-memory tool for sharing survivor stories.

Finally, in the open forum, we have asked five Holocaust scholars, **Natalia Aleksium**, **Petro Dolhanov**, **Roman Mykhalchuk**, **Monika Vrzgulová**, and **Albert Wenger** to reflect on the use of testimonies and oral history in their own research, and to discuss the importance and challenges of using testimonies and survivor stories collected – in written, oral, video, or digital form – in various times and places. We have also asked them to reflect on how the knowledge gained from collecting and using oral history and testimonies in Holocaust research can inform current collecting initiatives in relation to contemporary conflicts, specifically the ongoing war in Ukraine. The contributors to this open forum mainly focus on oral history and other survivor accounts as sources within the field of Holocaust studies, as we asked them to reflect on the use of testimonies or oral history in their own research However, oral history is not only a method or a source, but a research field and a

movement in itself. Occasionally, the development of the research field of Holocaust studies and oral history has developed cooperatively. A few scholars identify both as Holocaust scholars *and* as oral historians, combining and contributing to the discussions and debates within and between the two research fields. With that said, we would like to encourage more cooperations, debates and conversations between the two research fields, as we have a lot to learn together and from each other.