

### Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. An analytical retrospective of the Foundation's collection phase

If survivors of genocidal acts spoke about their experience in front of a camera, it was either in a war crimes trial setting or for a documentary filmmaker. The development of easy-to-use, affordable video technology in the early 1980s enabled oral history projects not only to record the voice but also the face of the interviewee. Early videotaping projects focused primarily on Holocaust survivors, while others gathered the testimonials of survivors of the Armenian genocide. Aging survivors, the awareness that their stories would soon be lost, and a growing trend towards a visually-oriented society generated a multitude of videotaping projects in the 1980s and 1990s. The projects varied in size (amount of testimonies), scope (domestic versus international), content (types of experiences covered), methodology (interview format and location of interview), and purpose (memorialization, therapy, research, education).<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, survivor and remembrance groups as well as research- and education-oriented institutions such as universities, research centers, and museums began to recognize the need for visual history. By the end of 2003, an extraordinary amount of Holocaust survivor and witness accounts – estimated to number around 70,000 – had been gathered worldwide.<sup>2</sup> The majority (75 per cent) of this massive data was collected by one project – Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation (Shoah Foundation).

The success of Schindler's List, the momentum it created among the general public and survivor communities, the timing of the creation of the Shoah Foundation, the staff the Foundation attracted, as well as the financial resources that were available to the Shoah Foundation all resulted in the successful collection of over 51,000 testimonies of Holocaust survivors and witnesses. But the very conditions that ensured the Shoah Foundation's success also created significant stress on the process, the staff, and the Foundation's reputation.

The following takes a reflective look at the collection phase and outlines the path taken to gather such a vast amount of historical and personal audio-visual documentation.

#### *In the beginning*

When Steven Spielberg started to deal with the subject of Thomas Keneally's novel about Oskar Schindler, he had to confront tremendous skepticism – from friends and colleagues alike. Some thought his name could be a detriment to this film, others – fellow directors – urged him “to let them make the film so it would get more respect”.<sup>3</sup> The movie Schindler's List and its worldwide success in particular

was a turning point for how the world-at-large came to view Steven Spielberg – not only the filmmaker but also the person. He was now being recognized as a filmmaker capable of dealing with a complex and serious subject in a considerate and respectable way.<sup>4</sup> Though he had already made films on serious subjects, i. e. The Color Purple, Empire of the Sun, as subject matters go, the Holocaust was in a league all of its own.

During the filming of Schindler's List, Steven Spielberg was often approached by survivors and asked whether he could film their recounting of their individual story of tragedy and survival. During a flight back home to the United States from Poland, Steven turned to his advisers and simply asked why one couldn't create a project which would provide survivors all over the world the chance to tell their individual stories. And as 'they' say, the rest is history [...] in this case [...] visual history.

In 1994, after Schindler's List was released, Steven Spielberg established Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, a non-profit organization, with an urgent mission: to chronicle – before it was too late – the firsthand accounts of Holocaust survivors. The goal of collecting 50,000 testimonies seemed attainable and was soon stated. That number was based on a variety of estimates, including the remaining survivor population, how many survivors might come forward, consideration of the financial resources available to undertake the task, and the simple fact, that it was a large number which, if achieved, would offer both depth and breadth in documenting virtually every category of experience in the lives of survivors. The Shoah Foundation also sought to create the most technologically advanced archive of Holocaust video testimony. Such state-of-the-art technology was to enable revolutionary access to these testimonies for anyone interested in the educational use of the material worldwide.<sup>5</sup>

The survivor population and the public in general responded enthusiastically to the Shoah Foundation. But this response was not always shared by the academic community. Many felt that the size of the project and the speed with which it was launched made it a proposition of dubious value. Comments about a videotaping “industry” and “Hollywoodization” were expressed.<sup>6</sup> The financial resources allotted to the Foundation's endeavor, the appearance of the Foundation as being a personal mission of one man, Steven Spielberg, who was so closely associated with fictional moviemaking, combined with its massive scale, drew a variety of critical remarks. The predominant view was that the complexity of the subject was beyond the capacity of an institution conceived by a Hollywood figure, however well-intentioned. The Shoah Foundation, in other words, faced criticisms quite similar to those that Spielberg himself faced when making “Schindler's List”.

4 The film's reviews were of course not always favorable. See a compilation of reviews printed in Gottfried Köhler, *Entscheidungen, Vorschläge und Materialien zur pädagogischen Arbeit mit dem Film „Schindler's Liste“*, Fritz-Bauer-Institut, Pädagogische Materialien Nr. 1, Frankfurt/M. 1995.

5 This article does not cover the development of the archival access created at the Foundation but focuses solely on the collection phase.

6 See various entries in the *First and Second Proceedings of the International Audiovisual Meetings on the Testimony of Survivors of the Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camps*, edited by La Fondation Auschwitz et La Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Déportation, Bruxelles and Paris, 1995 and 1996.

1 Just to name a few: Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University, New Haven; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington D. C.; WITNESS, New York; National Museum at Auschwitz (Oświęcim); AMCHA, Israel; Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

2 Estimate was generated by author.

3 As reported in an article by Tom Shales in the Washington Post, December 15, 1993: *The man at the top of 'Schindler's List'*.

However, many also acknowledged that no other organization could undertake anything close to the size and scale of what the Shoah Foundation set out to do, a capacity it had ironically, because of those very characteristics for which it was criticized. Steven Spielberg's name opened doors on many levels globally. Because of the success of the movie "Schindler's List" and because it received almost universal acclaim from survivors (despite criticism from others), Spielberg's name provided not only name recognition but also trust in many survivor communities.

The name and person Steven Spielberg also helped to raise additional funds to accomplish this monumental endeavor.<sup>7</sup> The resources the Shoah Foundation was able to call upon in the initial years either in money or in-kind donations were impressive and essential to the Foundation's success. But the Shoah Foundation was not only able to attract a wide range of financial support for its mission, the mission itself also inspired a tremendous amount of human support all over the world. Interviewing over 50,000 survivors and witnesses could not be accomplished by a few interviewers, no matter how much money was available. But the many that were needed could not have been paid full salaries to do the task either. The Foundation's mission inspired many people globally to offer their support and help in any way they could. The Shoah Foundation's success was as much dependent on financial resources as it was on people volunteering their time, skills and support.

The Foundation's start is often described as "hitting the ground running". Survivors and witnesses were aging and nearing the end of their lives. Many felt that they were ready to tell their story now, and they wanted to be heard before they died. Everyone involved at the Foundation saw the work as a race against time. A production-oriented mentality permeated all activities associated with it. Some of the staff who was crucial in setting up the Foundation's initial operation had extensive film production experience. Their skills and can-do approach were quite instrumental in creating an operation that was to collect as many videotaped interviews in as many countries just as it had been envisioned. The urgency resulted from two premises: a race against time because survivors were dying but also a race against time wanting to get these testimonies done sooner rather than later. It may be that "sooner rather than later" was a result of the first premise. That is, it was feared that if one were not to try and get to the projected goal as soon as possible, 50,000 could not be reached. Who was to guarantee that trying to take 10 or 15 years to collect testimonies would also result in 50,000 rather than trying to collect all those testimonies as quickly as possible?

### ***Establishing the operation***

In laying out a plan of work, geographic diversity and the existence of large survivor communities determined the initial areas of operation. It was certainly understood among Foundation staff that the testimonies ought to represent the widest possible range of geographies (survivors who emigrated and those who remained or returned to their country of origin) and experiences (e.g. pre-war German and Austrian refugees, individuals who were hidden whether as adults or children, ghetto

and camp survivors alike). While discussing the various options in interviewing and videotaping methodologies with consultants, other Holocaust oral history projects, and archives that had extensive experience in this area, the Foundation began to conduct its first interviews locally in Los Angeles. Benefiting from the experiences of others, its area of operation spread first within the United States – New York, Chicago and Miami. Toronto became the first stop internationally. From there, the Foundation moved to various countries in Europe, to Australia, Israel, South America and South Africa. By 1995, regional offices had been established in 16 cities outside the United States. In each region or country of operation, Regional Coordinators (RCs) were hired locally. Many of them were active in the communities in which they lived, and were thus able to introduce the Shoah Foundation to those communities. RCs were responsible for scheduling interviews and representing the Foundation. At the same time, they sensitized the U.S.-based staff to local cultures and issues. In order to establish a global presence, the Foundation contacted local lay and religious leaders, institutions, and individuals in many communities to seek guidance, support, and understanding of the culture, and issues unique to each country.

Local organizations, synagogues, survivor groups, secular and Jewish community papers and newsletters were contacted. Through announcements, articles, and word-of-mouth, survivors and witnesses heard about the Foundation. They in turn either telephoned local or toll-free lines to register with the Foundation or filled out flyers and returned them by mail.

When survivors registered, a list of questions was asked in order to ascertain the person's experience. The information about each survivor was either entered into a database by the Regional Coordinators who sent updates to the Los Angeles office periodically, or paperwork was sent directly to Los Angeles to be entered there into a central database. Thus, the staff in Los Angeles was able to keep track of who registered, where and when, and track the basic experience of the individual.

Foundation staff who received calls via the toll-free or local lines was sometimes the first individuals with whom survivors shared their stories. Sometimes, sons or daughters of survivors who had registered to be interviewed called up to say that a parent was in rapidly failing health and urged the staff to act quickly to coordinate the interview. And naturally, there were times when the staff tried to contact an interviewee to set-up an interview only to be informed that he/she had passed away in the meantime. Such occurrences – not uncommon – re-emphasized not only the urgency attached to the project but also provided understandable emotional stress to the staff at the Foundation.

### ***Whom did the Shoah Foundation interview?***

Interviewing survivors of the Shoah was obviously the main goal. But the Foundation did not aim to define a survivor in any exclusive context; that is, state who was a survivor and who was not. Instead its approach was to state which experiences were to be included in the archive and which were outside the Foundation's scope. The process was also dynamic and not fixed or strictly adhered to throughout the interviewing phase. On the one hand, the mission was to provide as many people as possible – that is at least 50,000 individuals – the opportunity finally to tell their individual stories. On the other hand, the Foundation expected to capture a wide variety of experiences. Once the production machinery was in high gear and the con-

<sup>7</sup> Steven Spielberg did provide the initial seed money to start the Shoah Foundation and has continued to provide significant financial support throughout the years, but the Foundation's operations could not be covered by those donations alone and fundraising became vital to its operation early on.

tent of testimonies began to be analyzed, priorities had to be set in order to assure that a wide range of experiences would be represented in the archive. In addition, logistical and practical reasons sometimes determined in what order interviews took place.

Regional Coordinators, as well as the staff answering the Foundation's main contact lines, were given guidelines as to who would be interviewed. In general, the Foundation interviewed individuals of Jewish ancestry if they lived under German and/or Axis rule after 1933 for any period of time, and experienced persecution and/or exclusionist policies. This approach included German and Austrian refugees who were able to leave Nazi Germany and/or Austria after 1938, those who hid and/or were hidden, lived under false identity, and those individuals who survived ghettos and/or camps.

On occasion, individuals or survivor groups of a particular experience had to be alerted to the fact that their experiences were also of interest to the Foundation. For example, pre-war German and Austrian refugees did not always think of themselves as survivors. In Italy, many Jews who survived the war in hiding also did not think of themselves as survivors of the Holocaust. A number of local oral history projects defined survivors as only those individuals who survived Nazi camps. The Foundation had to make it clear that it would also interview those who survived by hiding.

Each Regional Coordinator needed some flexibility in deciding whether or not to include an individual's experience. It was not always feasible to contact the Los Angeles office to discuss each case before setting up the interview. At the height of the collection phase, the Foundation's network of RCs coordinated over 300 interviews a week.

On occasion, it became clear only after a taping that a particular survivor experience could be deemed historically rare and important. The level of preparation by an interviewer at times became an issue in such cases. In order to insure proper preparation in the future for such interviews and to educate the staff arranging them, a priorities list of historically significant experiences was distributed among the relevant staff. This helped to minimize the possibility of historically significant interviews being conducted with the lack of adequate preparation. At other times, it only became clear after the interview was taken, that the individual's experience did not "fit" the criteria that the Foundation was seeking to apply.<sup>8</sup> Another issue post-facto was that diversity of experiences being sought was becoming skewed.

The Foundation interviewed survivors from areas of the former Soviet Union - states of the former USSR and countries formerly under USSR hegemony. It also included those Jewish individuals who were not Soviet citizens and who fled from German-occupied Poland to Soviet-occupied Poland and were then either deported by the Soviets into the Soviet Union proper, or fled deeper into the USSR. After a considerable amount of such testimonies was taken, the research staff at the Foundation discussed whether to continue to include them. The experience was important to capture, but priorities needed to be established that focused on experiences under

<sup>8</sup> It is estimated that less than 0.1 per cent are interviews with interviewees whose experiences fall outside the kinds of experiences sought after. This certainly does not mean that the experiences collected are not valuable as well.

German and/or Axis occupation. There was concern that the archive might be dominated by 'refugee' experiences - with the full knowledge that the experiences of a person that fled Nazi Germany to the United States in 1939, for example, were quite different than the experiences of a person who was either fleeing the advancing German army or was deported further east by the Soviets and incarcerated in Soviet concentration camps.

In addition to Jewish individuals who experienced persecution under the Nazis and/or their allies, the Foundation also intended to include testimonies of non-Jewish survivors and witnesses. By the end of 1995, the experiences of liberators of Allied forces as well as rescuers were also sought. A researcher position was dedicated to establish the kinds of non-Jewish experiences the Foundation should try to include. By 1996, the range of non-Jewish experiences was established and included the following: Sinti and Roma ("gypsies") survivors, Jehovah's Witness survivors, homosexual survivors, political prisoners, survivors of Eugenics policies, liberators, war crimes trials participants and rescuers and aid givers. Two to three specialized researchers at the Los Angeles office were charged with coordinating outreach and providing information and resources to interviewers conducting these interviews. Priorities and guidelines were set as well as to who would be included in these groups. For example, rescuers of Jews were only interviewed if the Foundation also conducted an interview with the rescued person thus corroborating the story; or if the rescuer was honored by Yad Vashem as a "Righteous Among the Nations", or by another reputable organization as having saved a life or lives during the Holocaust.

### Interviewers

Aside from experiential considerations, the approach to who was interviewed and when was also dictated by practical considerations such as whether an interviewer was available in the area to do the interview. Logistics became more complicated in cases where survivors lived in remote areas. This dilemma was solved in any of several ways: interviewers might alert the Foundation of travel plans and their willingness to conduct interviews at their destination, if needed; survivors living in remote areas alerted the Foundation of their intent to travel where there might be available interviewers; an interviewer and videographer might be sent to conduct interviews with all the survivors who wanted to be interviewed in that area.

The Shoah Foundation did not recruit "professional" interviewers. Interviewers were volunteers and received a small stipend for their services. Interested candidates were accepted to training sessions on the basis of an application requiring responses to questions about their professional experience, education, knowledge of the Holocaust, the interviewing process, and the motivation for wanting to do this work. Interviewers were trained locally in the regions where they and the survivors resided.

Training sessions lasted three to four days. The sessions consisted of historical lectures, discussions on interviewing methodologies, and practical exercises. Organized and led by multilingual U.S. and Canadian-based teams, the training seminars were supported by local historians and psychologists. On occasion, simultaneous translation was used to facilitate communication.

Given the duration of only three to four days (mainly due to financial reasons), the pre-screening of interviewer candidates using applications was all the more important in order to ensure that invitations were extended only to individuals who at

least on paper seemed like suitable candidates. The training sessions could not give a potential interviewer a thorough history lesson about the subject matter nor provide extensive training on interviewing skills. But these sessions did provide the staff at the Foundation an opportunity to evaluate candidates firsthand and assess their suitability. Not everyone invited to a training session, was accepted to interview for the Foundation. Not everyone who was accepted to interview turned out to be a good interviewer.

The Foundation did establish an Interviewer Resources Department charged with reviewing the work of interviewers during the collection phase, though it did not do so at the same time as interviewing started. A fully deployed department was developed throughout 1995 and the department's staff grew with the expansion of interviewing in other countries. The reasons why it was not established at the beginning were manifold. A contributing factor was the belief that the cataloguing department – established also in 1995 – would provide not only electronic access to the testimonies, but would also evaluate them while cataloguing. The evaluations would then be used to provide feedback to the interviewers so as to correct any issues in their interviewing practice. This approach seemed quite ambitious – but so was the entire mission of the Foundation. As it turned out, the cataloguing department was not able to handle both assignments: develop a unique approach to cataloguing and indexing videotaped testimonies, implement that approach, and simultaneously keep up with the volume of testimonies coming in from the field. Thus the Interviewer Resources Department was expanded and charged solely with the task of reviewing interviews. As such, it was responsible for evaluating the work of interviewers, giving timely feedback, providing them with resource materials, and coaching them for particular interviews.

An interviewer or Regional Coordinator could contact the department and request more specific information that would provide historical context about the survivor's experience. Staffed by individuals with the needed language skills and historical knowledge, the staff worked primarily out of Los Angeles. Once an interview was done – especially the first interview conducted by an interviewer – it was given to a reviewer who critiqued the tape. Until a reviewer evaluated the first interview, the interviewer was not scheduled to do another.

Generally, the reviewer would call the interviewer and provide feedback on what was done well and what needed work. This seemed a simple enough task, but the implementation of it on such a vast quantitative, geographic, and linguistic scale was quite challenging. If an interviewer did not conduct an interview well, the interview had been completed in any case, and one could not just simply recreate it, especially if it had been taken in a remote area. Although the Foundation occasionally recorded interviews that were of very poor quality, either technical or otherwise, there was no question that conducting interviews worldwide with the goal of reaching 50,000 testimonies would place limits on what was possible in this area.

Interviewers' strengths and weaknesses were also communicated to the Regional Coordinators. This was intended to help them when scheduling interviews and matching interviewee with interviewer. Reviewers worked in all languages represented in the archive in order to communicate the standards set by the Foundation. But the review staff recognized that it was important, if not crucial, to understand that interviewing "styles" would vary from culture to culture.

### *Coordinating interviews*

Outreach and coordination of interviews followed a similar pattern in every country, but there was a major difference between the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe on the one hand and the rest of the world on the other. Differences in living standards affected the approach and the Foundation found it couldn't rely very much on media announcements and distribution of registration flyers. This difference was less pronounced in the larger cities, but certainly the case for smaller towns and communities in remote areas. In order to reach those survivors, the Foundation coordinated trips to various communities and areas where prior research indicated the existence of a potential pool of interviewees. Teams of interviewers and videographers were sent to these areas for brief periods of time with either the names or addresses of survivors or that of a contact person.

Locating survivors in remote areas of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union was not the only challenge. Living standards in those countries – not only the remote and/or small villages – were generally far below that of those found elsewhere. The uninterrupted availability of electricity was not a given and thus, if survivors agreed to be interviewed, the time of the interview had to be coordinated with the availability of electrical power – which was not always predictable. In addition, survivors were given a financial subsidy to cover the cost of expense of using extra electricity in their home to run the camera and lights to do the interview.

Although usually conducted in the language of the survivor's choice, the language of the interview was determined by several factors. Survivors frequently chose to tell their story in the language of their grandchildren. But most often, they told the story in the language with which they felt most comfortable. Interviews were usually videotaped in the survivor's home unless another location was requested.

The Foundation also interviewed survivors who had kept their Jewish background a secret from their own family for years. Many of these survivors preferred to be interviewed in places outside of their own home. Survivors often kept their own Jewish identity hidden in the post-World War II era due to continued fear of antisemitic reprisal, discrimination, and/or a generally repressive political climate. These survivors had not emigrated away from but rather were living in the countries – the towns and villages – in which the Holocaust had taken place. Many neighbors who may have been involved in enacting Nazi policies, continued to live in close proximity to their victims. At the same time, persecution of the European Jewry during WW II was not a subject of public and/or academic discourse after the war in these countries; it was regarded as a taboo. This experience was not exclusively Eastern European although anecdotal evidence suggests it was more prevalent there than in Western European countries.

### *Interviewing Methodology*

The Shoah Foundation Interviewing Methodology required that the interviewer meet with the interviewee on at least two occasions. The first meeting had two purposes: to establish a rapport with the interviewee and to fill out a Pre-Interview Questionnaire (PIQ). As much as the Foundation encouraged these meetings to be in person, some were conducted over the phone; how many ended up being done over the phone versus in person is at this point impossible to re-establish. The PIQ was

designed to gather basic biographic and experiential information about the interviewee and was intended to help the interviewer to get to know the experience of the survivor they were to interview. If the survivor experience seemed unfamiliar, the interviewer had some time to prepare for the actual interview.

The Foundation's staff very soon discovered that the Pre-Interview Questionnaire (PIQ) was not only useful as a tool for the interviewer to prepare for an interview, but was also an important document that needed to be preserved on its own merits. Information from the PIQs was thus included in the cataloguing and indexing process as the systems developed. Survivors often added family names and their respective fates to the PIQ that they failed to mention later in the actual interview.

At first, interviewees were directed to structure their interviews into three parts: prewar, wartime, and postwar. Interviewees were asked to spend about 20 per cent of the interview on prewar, 60 per cent on wartime, and 20 per cent on postwar experiences. But keeping to this structure was not always possible or sensible, so the Shoah Foundation Interview Methodology was modified. Shoah Foundation interviewers were then asked to adapt the amount of time dedicated to each period based on many factors, including the complexity of the story, the interviewee's age during that period, and his/her memory of particular events. Interviewees were advised to be flexible and to adjust the structure based on the experience of the person to be interviewed. For example, an interview with a survivor who was able to flee Germany and settle in the USA in 1939 followed a different structure, from a survivor who lived in a small village in Poland, survived the Warsaw ghetto, and later suffered in camps such as Majdanek or Auschwitz.

It was important to include narration on the life led before the Holocaust occurred since much of that way of life became extinct as a result and because it added context to the entire interview. Therefore, allowing survivors to verbally recreate the past added historical value. Equally important was the discussion of survivors' experiences after the event up to the time of taping, especially if the interview occurred many years after the fact. How did one cope with the experience? How did one go on living? The format of videotape also allowed for the inclusion of additional documentary evidence – displaying a prisoner uniform worn in a concentration camp, a number tattooed on one's arm, or photos of family members who perished were just a few examples.

Shoah Foundation interviews were usually not conducted like a "question and answer" session. Rather, they reflected an approach that focused on using open-ended questions, guiding the narrative in a chronological manner, and encouraging the interviewee to share his or her reactions related to what they witnessed firsthand. But this approach also asked interviewees to clarify, probe and follow-up in order to elicit more details when needed.

Interviewees were given suggestions for questions pertinent to a variety of different experiences, usually tailored to the history of the country in which the interviewee's wartime experience took place. These questions pointed toward the kinds of topics the Foundation wanted to have covered in interviews. The objective was always to permit the survivor to tell his or her own story with the least possible intervention from the interviewer.

Specific interview guidelines were developed for interviewing child survivors, the blind, seriously ill, and those in early stages of degenerative nervous or cognitive

disorders. In short, the Shoah Foundation both recognized and tried to adapt to the diversity of survivor and witness experiences and worked to create circumstances in which all of those who were interviewed felt comfortable, and thus offered as full a rendering of their experience as they could.

The Foundation created guidelines not only about structure, but also the average length of interviews. Given both the extent of the project goals and its own considerable but still limited resources, it was not only understandable, but necessary for such a guideline to be established. However, it was still the case that in the end, interviews varied in length considerably – the shortest being less than half an hour and the longest over 17 hours. The testimonies of interviewees who were able to shed light on historically significant and rare events usually lasted longer than the average of 2 to 2.5 hours per interview.<sup>9</sup>

### *Completion of over 50,000 interviews*

By 1995, a year after the Shoah Foundation began, it had collected over 10,000 interviews. By 1997, that number more than doubled to 25,000 testimonies and two years later, the goal of 50,000 testimonies was reached. The Shoah Foundation continued to conduct interviews but on a very small scale. It contacted survivors via mail who had registered but had not been interviewed at that point.<sup>10</sup> They were alerted to the closing of the interviewing phase. Some decided not to go through with it and others were then ready to have their interview conducted.

In the end, about 2,300 interviewees, 1,000 videographers, 100 Regional Coordinators and the local staff in Los Angeles (consisting of 100 to 250 people at various times) engaged in interviewing survivors and witnesses between 1994 and 2003. This group of individuals enabled the Shoah Foundation to gather over 50,000 interviews with Jewish survivors, over 1,000 testimonies with rescuers and aid providers, over 360 testimonies with liberators, over 360 testimonies with Sinti and Roma ("gypsies") survivors, over 90 political prisoners, over 80 testimonies with Jehovah's Witnesses, 50 testimonies with war crimes trials participants, 13 testimonies with survivors of Eugenic policies and 8 testimonies with homosexual survivors. Interviews were done in 56 countries from Argentina (over 700 interviews) to Zimbabwe (8 interviews) and in 32 different languages that include Ladino (10 interviews) and Romani (over 200 interviews). By 2003, over 51,700 interviews were ultimately amassed.

Mistakes were surely made – if one could do it all over again, one would probably handle a few things differently. For example, spent more time on a pre-production phase to develop a more comprehensive and thought out plan before going into interviewing on such a massive scale. But then again, given the goal and being confronted with a dying population, it was understandable that the "hitting the ground running" approach was taken. Learning from other projects worked for certain elements but the Foundation's goals were unique in its scope and scale and thus learn-

<sup>9</sup> This is based more on anecdotal observations rather than a scientific analysis.

<sup>10</sup> Survivors sometimes had registered but when called to do the interview had changed their minds or needed more time to think about it. At other times, they had been sick and needed time to recuperate so the interview was postponed indefinitely; or survivors had passed away before the interview could be conducted. These were just a few of the many reasons of why their interviews had not been conducted by then.

ing from others was not always an option. By the same token, the Foundation often reacted to criticisms and/or mistakes implementing measures intended to prevent them from happening again.

### The next steps

In 2001, the Shoah Foundation announced its new mission and is since engaged in tolerance education. To overcome prejudice, intolerance, and bigotry – and the sufferings they cause – through the educational use of the Foundation's visual history testimonies has become the new calling. The Foundation focuses on building partnerships with like-minded institutions to create educational programs and products as well as preserve and provide access to the archive. An intensive program of indexing and digitization of the testimonies is underway. Once digitized, catalogued and indexed, researchers can access information about specific individuals, places, and experiences mentioned in the spoken narratives in much the same way that an index permits a reader to find specific information in a book.

Testimonies which already are digitized, catalogued, and/or indexed (over 30,000) can currently be accessed at three Universities – Yale, Rice and the University of Southern California – through Internet2. The entire archive will be indexed and digitized by the end of 2005. Internet2, separate from the World Wide Web, is a high-quality, very secure network created to promote research and communication between nearly 200 universities and research institutions in the United States. The life stories of the archive are part of the cultural heritage of the cities and countries where they were conducted. Committed to returning the testimonies to these communities, the Foundation is partnering with numerous institutions globally. For example, copies of testimonies of the Dutch national collection – interviews taken in Dutch and/or the Netherlands – have been placed at the Joods Historisch Museum in Amsterdam. The German collection has been placed in the Jüdisches Museum Berlin's library in May 2004. Similar projects are under way for the French and Italian national collections which will be placed at the Centre de Documentation Juivre Contemporaine in Paris and the Archivio centrale dello Stato in Rome respectively, in 2004. Smaller collections have been placed in other institutions such as 33 German language testimonies at the memorial site of the former concentration camp at Dachau, Germany or 40 testimonies conducted with Bosnian Holocaust survivors were placed with the Jewish Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo.<sup>11</sup>

First-person accounts have been considered by some as questionable historical resources. Memory is deemed too unreliable, particularly if testimonies are taken many years after the event. However, historian Christopher Browning noted about his research on a Jewish forced labor camp, for which he used survivor testimonies, that those testimonies were “more stable and less malleable” than he had anticipated.<sup>12</sup> Others argue that only sources created at the time of the event are reliable – an argument that should also be questioned. German documents created during the 1940s were often “designed to mislead rather than to inform, to hide rather than to reveal”.<sup>13</sup> Testimonies are crucial when historical knowledge has largely been based

11 For more information about the Shoah Foundation's work go to [www.vhf.org](http://www.vhf.org).

12 Christopher Browning, *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers*, Cambridge (U. K.), p. 91.

13 Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, New Haven (Conn.), 2001, p. 23.

on perpetrator documentation and, as in the case of the Holocaust, the perpetrators tried to eradicate not only a people but also all documentation of that eradication itself.

Many efforts to collect Holocaust survivor testimonies audio visually have been initiated between the 1970s and 1990s to preserve the past and to educate future generations. Video records simultaneously the words, facial experience and, as such, makes history not only come alive but also give it a human dimension.

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