

# Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies

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## Toward a Fifteenth Anniversary

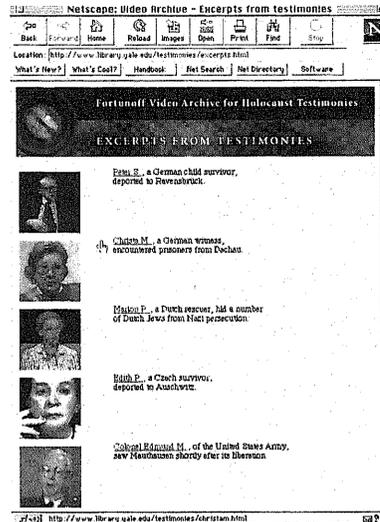
In December of 1981 a New Haven grassroots organization, the Holocaust Survivors Film Project, deposited two hundred interviews at Yale which were to become the core of our collection. It seems like yesterday; but in December of this year the Video Archive marks its fifteenth anniversary.

The Archive has grown to hold 3600 testimonies: close to 9000 hours of videotaped interviews. The demand on it by survivors who wish to be recorded has not diminished. We continue to respond to individual requests, and will also complete significant projects in Israel, Belgium, Germany (Berlin), Slovakia, the former Yugoslavia, the Czech Republic and France (Paris) over the next two years. By the end of the century, when the recording of survivor and bystander witnesses is essentially complete, Yale's Fortunoff Video Archive, which pioneered the video testimony, will contain well over 4000 witness accounts.

Statistics are not the whole story, of course. We have approached our task aware of the individual survivor and diverse communities. Our aim in creating affiliates throughout the U.S. and then in Israel, Canada, South America, and Europe, was always to foster a community spirit, and to join with major educational institutions. The future importance of the video testimonies for education cannot be exaggerated. They will provide the most vivid collective portrait of the eyewitness generation as well as considerable historical data. Each country in which we have worked will have a small but significant collection of witness accounts in its own language, which should facilitate their use in the media and the schools.

No archive should be just a collection, sitting inertly on the shelves of a library. To encourage research and educational dissemination, we decided from the beginning to catalog the collection, using computer technology. Summaries of over 1000 testimonies are presently on line, and can be searched at libraries and institutions in any country. This may be done through RLIN (Research Libraries Information Network), or through the Yale Library Online Public Access Catalog on the Internet. We hope to complete cataloging the testimonies by the beginning of 1999. Researchers who use our catalog can search the database with keywords to access summaries and obtain an overview of our holdings. They can then visit Yale, where the Department of Manuscripts & Archives has made viewing facilities available and our staff provides reference assistance and expert advice. The Righteous Persons Foundation (see page 10) has provided a grant to help us complete our computer catalog.

This *Newsletter* is a crowded one. From its pages you will be able to acquire a fuller sense of all our activities. We have



The Fortunoff Video Archive's site on the Internet.

principals of the Archive are invited to speak or which they help to organize grows from year to year.

Moreover, as we enter the age of the Internet we have a responsibility for establishing access policies as well as effectively integrating the testimonies into the programs of museums, high schools and universities — here and abroad. We already have cooperative agreements with the Moses Mendelssohn Center for the Study of European Judaism at the University of Potsdam (Berlin) and the Milan Simecka Foundation in Bratislava, as well as with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. We are presently discussing the deposit of the tapes made in France and Israel with national or university archives there. Among future challenges, one of the greatest is the fact that videotape has a limited life and that we will eventually have to preserve our collection by reformatting it as new technologies become affordable.

In conclusion, I wish to thank the many who have entrusted their testimonies to us. Without the loyal and hardworking staff of the Fortunoff Archive, I would be frazzled and frantic. And without our supporters, who help us from year to year, we could not look with confidence into the future or plan to make the Video Archive an important educational presence in the new millennium.

Geoffrey H. Hartman

*Faculty Advisor and Project Director, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies*

*Sterling Professor of English and Comparative Literature  
Yale University*

become an international resource. But as the work of collecting reaches toward completion, the responsibility of thinking about the educational uses of the testimonies increases. More and more visitors are coming to the Archive, and many institutions are seeking out our help. Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation has designated Yale's Video Archive as one of five depositories. The number of conferences at which

### *Affiliates Abroad*

**Argentina** — Argentina's President Menem donated an official building in Buenos Aires to be the new home of the *Fundacion "Memoria del Holocausto."* In his dedication speech, President Menem reiterated his commitment to identifying, detaining, and putting on trial the authors of the attacks on Jewish and Israeli organizations which occurred in Buenos Aires and demolished several buildings. The *Fundacion* has completed 27 survivor testimonies which are now at the Fortunoff Video Archive.

**Belgium** — The *Fondation Auschwitz*, in partnership with the *Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Déportation* (France) held an international conference in Paris for organizations involved in videotaping witness accounts of the Holocaust. The September 1994 meeting was an opportunity for groups from the United States, France, Germany, Israel, Australia, Poland, England and Belgium, including many of our affiliates, to share their experiences and perspectives. *Fondation Auschwitz*, which has been interviewing survivors in the studio of the Free University of Brussels since 1993, hopes to use the conference as a platform for establishing a pan-European organization to coordinate future taping initiatives. A follow-up conference is planned for 1996. *Fondation Auschwitz* has contributed 45 interviews to the Fortunoff Video Archive.

**Berlin** — The affiliate project in Berlin has been funded by a grant from the Volkswagen Foundation. Cathy Gelbin, who coordinates the work of the affiliate in Berlin with Eva Lezzi, reports:

"This German project, a cooperation between the Moses Mendelssohn Center for European-Jewish Studies at the University of Potsdam and Yale's Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, has been a long time in the making. When Berlin's Jewish community printed our first notice in its May 1995 newsletter, we did not know how many survivors would come forth and whether our project would be successful. Considering our specific situation as a local project in two federal states (Berlin-Brandenburg), situated in the land of the perpetrators, the initial response by some fifteen survivors was exhilarating. Since then, we have been recording between five and ten testimonies monthly, with an average length of three to five hours.... We have recorded fifty interviews and are thus approaching the seventy originally planned for the two-year testimony project.

While our interviewees usually live in the region of Berlin-Brandenburg, they were not always born there. We are working with a diverse group of survivors primarily from central and eastern Europe — former concentration camp inmates as well as those who survived in hiding or in exile. The large number of participants from mixed marriages has been particularly surprising, since this group tended to keep a low profile in the past.

Our group of twenty interviewers is similarly diverse. It includes Jews and non-Jews, East and West Germans, North

and South Americans; literary critics, among them both project coordinators, as well as historians, political scientists, psychoanalysts and psychologists, among other professions. With one exception, we all belong to the first or second post-war generation....

On February 19, our archive was opened to the public in Berlin's Wannsee House Museum. As work in progress, our archive now provides important research materials for school groups and other visitors to this museum. A volume is planned, edited by myself and Eva Lezzi, which analyzes the historical, psychological, gendered and other aspects of survivor testimony in today's Germany."

**France** — A montage of survivor testimonies from the collection of our affiliate *Témoignages pour Mémoire*, coordinated by Annette Wiewiorka, a historian with the *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*, was screened at the opening of a recent photographic exhibit. The exhibit, which depicts the liberation of the camps and the return of the deportees at the end of World War II, was prepared by two professors of history at the University of Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yveline and their students. Henri Borlant, a survivor of Auschwitz and interviewer for *Témoignages*, edited the survivor interviews, assisted by history students. The exhibit is traveling to several cities in France, accompanied by M. Borlant's video. *Témoignages pour Mémoire* has been generously supported by Laboratoires Hoechst and has contributed almost one hundred testimonies to the Fortunoff Video Archive.

**Greece** — Having recorded twenty-five interviews with survivors and witnesses in Thessalonike in 1993, Jasa Almulic, our coordinator in the former Yugoslavia, returned to Greece in December 1994 to videotape residents of Athens. Sixteen testimonies of camp survivors, ex-partisans, and individuals who escaped deportation by hiding were recorded in four languages.

**Yugoslavia** — Mr. Almulic completed testimonies of 37 witnesses in Yugoslavia prior to the civil war. Since the cessation of hostilities, he has completed an additional 16 testimonies in Belgrade and will return this spring to continue the work.

**Israel** — In partnership with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and coordinated by Nathan Beyrak in Tel Aviv, a testimony project has been recording witness accounts since 1990. 348 testimonies, comprising approximately 2,290 hours, have been received by Yale and the Washington Museum. In the last year, 69 witnesses were taped over 58 shooting days, resulting in 439 hours of testimony. Taping takes place at the Tel Aviv office of Amcha, an organization dedicated to providing psychological and social support to Holocaust survivors. Amcha anticipates depositing a number of independently produced testimonies with the Video Archive.

This year the project focussed on two groups of survivors: witnesses from Laachva, a small town in Belarus (formerly Poland), and child survivors from Kovno, who were evacuated from the Kovno ghetto in 1944 and traveled through Dachau, Birkenau, Mauthausen and Gunskirchen before liberation.

Nathan Beyrak founded *Words & Images: the Jerusalem Literary Project* in 1994. The effort aims to add a unique dimension to the documentation of the Jewish experience through videotape interviews with leading writers and thinkers. Each author is interviewed by a scholar knowledgeable about the interviewee's work. The recordings of these interviews will serve the basis of television programs, publications, and educational materials.

Of the five interviews taped to date, four were conducted with authors who are survivors of the Holocaust. Aharon Appelfeld and Ida Fink (Israel), Julian Strykowski (Poland) and George Konrad (Hungary) have shared their experiences of the Holocaust and its effect upon their life and work. Copies of these interviews have been deposited with the Fortunoff Video Archive.

Prime Minister Shimon Peres serves as the project's honorary President. Geoffrey Hartman is the Senior Academic Advisor and Eleanora Lev is Literary Editor. The project is conducted under the auspices of the National and University Library of Jerusalem, Mishkenot Sha'ananim, and the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Other supporters include the Fortunoff Video Archive and the Rita Poretsky Foundation of Washington, D.C.



Hungarian Jewish author George Konrad visiting the Words & Images project in Jerusalem: Itzhak Livni, chairperson; Eleanora Lev, literary editor; Prime Minister Shimon Peres, honorary president; George Konrad; Nathan Beyrak, director; Estee Du-Nur, director of Mishkenot Sha'ananim.

**Slovakia** — An oral history project under the auspices of the Milan Šimečka Foundation celebrated the completion of its fiftieth testimony in December, 1995. Taping continues in 1996 with the intention of completing 100 interviews. Interviewer Peter Salner reports that "the preliminary results enable us to disprove some myths that burden the mutual

relations between the Slovak and Jewish people until today." The project has also held ceremonies for its interviewees, at which they are recognized and presented with a copy of their testimony. Martin Butora, the project coordinator, anticipates the publication of a book based on the testimonies.

**Ukraine** — A two-week roving documentation project sponsored jointly by the Fortunoff Video Archive and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and with assistance from the research staff of the Ghetto Fighters' Kibbutz, taped sixty hours of interviews with forty-three witnesses while traveling some 3,500 kilometers through Ukraine. The camera crew and interviewing team not only recorded testimonies in makeshift studios, but followed survivors and witnesses to the actual sites of events described in their interviews, including the Kharkov ghetto, the camp at Pechora, a former synagogue in Shargorod and a mass grave in Zhitomir.

While shooting on location, the team happened upon several individuals who were survivors. These "impromptu witnesses" briefly recounted their testimonies in some of the most emotional encounters of the trip. Project coordinator Nathan Beyrak suggests that "the very fact that a 'Jewish camera' was traveling around, publicly visiting places of Jewish historical significance from the Holocaust period, was especially meaningful for those local residents who had only recently started to make their Jewish identity known." The Video Archive and Washington Museum have co-sponsored similar projects in Belarus and Poland.

#### *News from United States Affiliates*

**Missouri** — The Midwest Center for Holocaust Education has produced two documentaries. Utilizing edited portions of witness accounts, "The Holocaust: Through Our Own Eyes" traces the stories of survivors, liberators, and witnesses. The 58-minute version, including parallel references to Kansas City history, was screened at the Truman Library in conjunction with the 50th anniversary of V-E Day. Almost fifty testimonies have been sent to Yale from Kansas City.

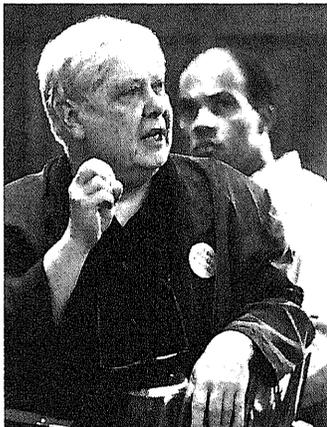
**Massachusetts** — The Holocaust Center of the North Shore has been taping since 1987, and has completed eighty-five testimonies to date. Since the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the camps, there has been an upsurge in requests for interviews from both liberators and child survivors. The Holocaust Center has also interviewed recent emigrés from the former Soviet Union in their native language. They have previously recorded testimonies in Greek and Slovak.

**New York** — A Living Memorial to the Holocaust - Museum of Jewish Heritage began taping as a Yale affiliate in 1990. The project was funded by the Charles H. Revson Foundation and through 1994 deposited approximately six hundred testimonies at Yale. A portion of the New York tapes were made possible by Selfhelp Community Services, which organized taping sessions in their central Queens office and provided experienced interviewers.

### *Holocaust Education/Prejudice Reduction Program*

Chaired by Marvin and Murray Lender and Geoffrey Hartman, the program has been housed in the Jewish Federation of Greater New Haven since 1988, and provides training to school systems in the area, to increase the knowledge and skills of local teachers. Almost fifty of the teachers have attended five day courses at *Facing History and Ourselves*, and a dozen have spent three weeks studying in Eastern Europe and Israel on a summer program led by Vladka Meed and sponsored by the Jewish Labor Committee. The Fortunoff Video Archive provides academic support, and also makes edited testimonies and films available to the participating schools. Scholars who have participated in the program include Yehuda Bauer (Hebrew University), Lawrence Langer (Simmons College), Susan Zuccotti (Barnard), Samuel Kassow (Trinity), Paula Hyman (Yale), Richard Cohen (Hebrew University), Deborah Dwork (Yale), Donald Green (Yale), Stephen Wizner (Yale Law School), Jocelyn Chadwick Joshua (Dallas Institute of Humanities & Culture), and Ze'ev Menkowitz (Hebrew University). ACES (Area Cooperative Educational Services) has been the site of many workshops and seminars and promotes the program through its network.

### *Conferences*



John E. Wideman and William Gass at the Tenth Anniversary Conference

The Archive's Tenth Anniversary conference, entitled "The Future of Memory," took place at Yale in October 1992. It was convened to survey the changing landscape of public memory. Themes included such questions as "What constitutes the effective remembrance of history? How do we bring memory into the future, and ensure its preservation?" Lectures addressed Holocaust museums, monuments, fictional representations and media coverage in an effort to find

strategies for understanding and strengthening public memory. The conference resulted in a number of publications, including a special anthology of essays by Geoffrey Hartman, Andreas Huyssen, Lawrence Langer, and James Young, published in the *Yale Journal of Criticism*. Partial funding was provided by the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation, the John and Rose Fox Fund, and several Yale departments and programs.

The Video Archive's first decade was also celebrated at a reception and dinner sponsored by Yale President Howard Lamar in December 1992. Elie Wiesel was guest of honor and keynote speaker. The reception was chaired by New Haven volunteers William Rosenberg and Barbara Wareck, the dinner by Leon Weinberg.

Geoffrey Hartman attended the first international conference on Audiovisual Testimonies of Survivors of the Nazi Persecutions in Paris from September 16-18, 1994.

The conference was cosponsored by *Fondation Auschwitz* (Brussels, Belgium) and the *Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Déportation* (Paris, France), in an effort to foster increased cooperation among video testimony projects, including a number of affiliates of the Fortunoff Video Archive. The second conference will be held in May of 1996, with Geoffrey Hartman and Joanne Rudof representing the Fortunoff Video Archive.

Dr. Dori Laub organized a retreat in July 1995 held in Millwood, New York entitled "Coming Home from Trauma: Transmission to the Next Generation, Muteness, and the Search for a Voice." In March 1996, he convened a conference in Tel Aviv sponsored by the Israeli Ministry of Health, to explore the recording of psychiatrically hospitalized Holocaust survivors.

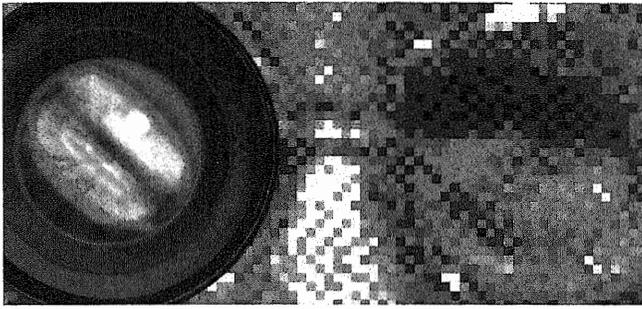
### *Publications*

The Second Edition of the *Guide to Yale University Library Holocaust Video Testimonies* was published in 1994, summarizing and indexing 567 interviews from the Video Archive's collection, including all the records from the *Guide's* First Edition. Since that time, the on-line catalogs have continued to grow, and now provide scholarly access to more than one thousand testimonies.

The Video Archive has also created a "site" on the Internet, which features short video and audio testimony excerpts. A transcript of each excerpt is available, with a short summary of the complete testimony to supply context. The site also provides information about the Archive's history, mission, and affiliate projects, describes the edited programs available for loan to educators and community groups, and offers detailed instructions for searching our on-line catalogs. To visit, point your World Wide Web browser to <<http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/homepage.html>>. A grant from Yale Library's SCOPA (Standing Committee on Professional Awareness) underwrote the digitization and related costs in developing the site.

Geoffrey Hartman delivered the 1994 Helen and Martin Schwartz Lectures in Judaic Studies at Indiana University, on the theme of "An Era of Testimony." The two lectures, entitled "Learning from Survivors," and "Reading the Wound: Holocaust Testimony, Art and Trauma" are included in his newest volume of essays, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*, published by Indiana University Press. Professor Hartman and Joanne Rudof are both planning contributions to a volume intended to assess the experiences of survivor testimony projects over the last decade, to be edited by Henry Greenspan and Sidney Bolkosky (University of Michigan). Professor Lawrence Langer's latest book, *Admitting the Holocaust*, published by Oxford University Press in 1995, also includes several essays based upon his work with the Video Archive. Joanne Rudof contributed "The Things that Sustained Me" to Volume II of *Second to None: A Documentary History of American Women*.

Principals of the Video Archive have written articles for a wide variety of publications, including *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*; *Raritan Review*; *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*; *Dimensions*; *Salamagundi*; *Internet on the Holocaust and Genocide* and the *Yale Journal of Criticism*.



*Sites of Memory: The Bolivia Project*

Dartmouth College Professors Leo Spitzer (History) and Marianne Hirsch (Literature) used their extensive experience as Holocaust scholars to record the testimonies of Bolivian survivors for the Fortunoff Video Archive in the spring of 1995 with funding from the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation. They describe their experiences:

“You have to speak to Marek A.,” everyone told us before we set off for Bolivia. Marek, a survivor of Majdanek and a number of labor camps, plays an important leadership role in the community of survivors in La Paz, and has an amateur historian’s interest in documenting their accounts. We wrote to Marek telling him about the Fortunoff Video Archive and our intention to tape survivor testimonies during our stay in the country, and asked for his help in setting up appointments with persons who might be willing to record their accounts. When we arrived, he had a list ready for us: names, telephone numbers, background information about each person or couple with whom he had spoken about our project.

During our first evening in La Paz, we went to have a light meal at the Patiseria Ely’s — a restaurant owned by a Jewish refugee who had fled to Bolivia during the “panic emigration” from Central Europe in 1939. There we met some of the restaurant’s “regulars,” a group of elderly but youthful looking men drinking tea, eating Apfelstrudel, and talking business and politics in a mixture of Spanish, Yiddish, Polish, and English. All of them were Holocaust survivors, already on Marek’s list, and eager for the opportunity to schedule their sessions with us.

We had not expected such an overwhelming welcome and such readiness to participate in the Fortunoff project. No one in the Bolivian community of survivors had ever testified before; many had never even discussed their Holocaust experiences with their own children. In scheduling our meetings and taping sessions, we always provided information about the Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale and its importance as a repository and source of knowledge about the Holocaust. Furthermore, Leo’s personal connection to Bolivia (he was born in La Paz, the child of refugees who had fled there) certainly eased whatever reluctance any of them may have had to tell their stories to “a stranger.” Some of them had known his family, or had acquaintances in common with him.

Most importantly, all of those who agreed to testify stated that they did so because they wanted a recording of their memories for their own children and “for future generations.” They felt, as they grew older, and fewer and fewer of the

generation of survivors remained alive, that their story “needed to be known.” They had not spoken before because, as some explained, “the story was too awful” and they had been reluctant to recall it publicly. Others had always tried to push the past into a corner of their minds where it would not impair their “too busy” present lives. But now, many of them had decided, the “opportunity had come to them,” and they were ready to speak.

Eager for their children to see and keep the tapes, most of the witnesses wanted to testify in Spanish; some felt that it had become their most comfortable language. But language was always problematic in these testimonies. German entered into the descriptions of the camps with common expressions — “Entlausung,” “Blockalter,” “Musulmann” — and we all tried to find the correct Spanish equivalents. A number of witnesses felt most comfortable speaking in Yiddish, and some shifted languages in different parts of the interview.

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**Then he suddenly shifted into a German heavily inflected with Yiddish, and told how every day many fellow prisoners ran to the electric fence to commit suicide, either through electrocution or by being shot for “trying to escape.”**

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Jacopo B. was the most dramatic example. He, like others, was worried that he was not a good storyteller, insisting that Jews of his generation simply mastered no language: they grew up speaking Yiddish at home, learning Hebrew in the cheder and Polish on the street. As teenagers they had to learn German in the camps, and then Italian in the DP camps. A few went to Israel, where they had learned spoken Hebrew before again emigrating to join family in South America, arriving in Spanish-speaking Bolivia. Jacopo B.’s own testimony started out in Spanish. He described his youth in Poland, the arrival of the Germans, his deportation and first days in Auschwitz. He spoke of the excruciating cold, the freezing water, the unbearable work. Then he suddenly shifted into a German heavily inflected with Yiddish, and told how every day many fellow prisoners ran to the electric fence to commit suicide, either through electrocution or by being shot for “trying to escape.” He continued speaking Yiddish for the rest of his testimony about camp experience, and then, without seeming to realize it, again switched to Spanish when he told of his life after liberation.

Emigration to Bolivia was an important component of every account. Many of the survivors had come to Bolivia because they had relatives who preceded them. Some went

there because a Bolivian visa was the only one they could obtain; they went there in desperation before the war, or because they were eager to get out of the DP camps in Europe after the war had ended. Invariably, however, those who remained in Bolivia were able to carve out a new life for themselves in this Andean land. Many became quite successful; some acquired significant wealth. And every one of them is now extremely grateful to Bolivia — the land that took them in — grateful to have been able to move away from Europe and its history of Jewish persecutions. “These are simple people,” Salo F. told us, in reference to Bolivia’s Indian majority. “But every day I look at them, I think: they do not have Jewish blood on their hands.” Indeed, when asked about antisemitism in contemporary Bolivia, many of the survivors deny that it exists.

Many of the persons we videotaped had stories to tell about the notorious Nazi escapee Klaus Barbie: either about their personal encounters with Barbie during his years in Bolivia, or about Beate Klarsfeld, who hunted him down, or about Barbie’s connection to, and protection by, the Bolivian military officers who were then in power.

The fact that we were only visitors to Bolivia did raise questions in our minds about what kind of follow-up, ideally, there should be. During our stay in La Paz and visit to Cochabamba, we gained insight into the survivor community: the social life of its members and their relationships. It would be interesting to know how they had processed their sessions with us, but we were not in a position to discuss their post-taping feelings except by letter.

The days we spent in La Paz were days of intense, active, sympathetic listening. We felt both exhilarated and drained, traumatized in our own right by the intensity of these acts of listening. Still, at the end of every interview, we were told that we had only heard a small part, and not even the worst: there would have been so much more to tell.

Marianne Hirsch  
Leo Spitzer

Laura Yow is a student in the Yale University Graduate Program in English Language and Literature, Class of 1999. She has worked at translating the Video Archive’s French-language interviews into English since 1993, and anticipates incorporating her work with the testimonies into her dissertation.

While listening to a testimony recently, I was confronted with a scene that was extremely familiar, though I’d never witnessed it before. A woman, after repeated attempts to silence her husband, left the room where the interview was being conducted, saying “I can’t listen to this anymore.”

In the months that I’ve been working in the Fortunoff Video Archive, translating survivor testimony from French to English, I have often reached for the pause button on the VCR, ostensibly to verify the name of a village in Poland, or the precise location of a synagogue in Warsaw. When overwhelmed



*Kira Burova conducting an interview in Zhitomir, Ukraine*

by the immediacy of the video testimony before me, I have retreated into the abstract solace of an atlas, into the merciful particulars of orthography and geography. When I just can’t listen anymore, I have, in my own way, sought to silence the survivor.

This respite is but momentary; the man in the aforementioned testimony does not, perhaps cannot, stop talking, relating horror after horror, “and more, and more.” And for reasons I am still unable to articulate to my satisfaction, I do not, perhaps I cannot, stop listening. Attempts to explain why this may be generate incoherent outbursts on my part about responsibility, vigilance, memory. I talk of Primo Levi’s dream in *Survival in Auschwitz*, of “the desolating grief” born of “the unlistened-to-story,” of the fatal “eighty-first blow” delivered by the indifferent or incredulous interlocutor. I repeat the stories I have heard. All I can say for sure is, the more I hear, the less I can accept not knowing.

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I continue to listen to these narratives of loss and  
rupture not because therein lie the possibilities of  
redemption or reconciliation, but because not to  
listen would mean to be complicit in another kind of  
loss, a different type of rupture.

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Nevertheless, there is a discontinuity between knowledge and understanding that becomes ever more evident the more one knows. As a result, I continue to listen to these narratives of loss and rupture not because therein lie the possibilities of redemption or reconciliation, but because not to listen would mean to be complicit in another kind of loss, a different type of rupture. I have come to think of the activity of listening to survivor testimony as the fulfillment of a promise no one knows I've made, a promise I must honor to preserve some sense of integrity and morality at the end of an appalling century.

As a student of literature, I struggle with Adorno's dictum that "it is barbaric to continue to write poetry after Auschwitz," as well as with Enzensberger's rejoinder that "literature must resist precisely this verdict." As a future educator, I wonder about the ethical considerations of "using" the Holocaust in the classroom. I fear that I will fail in the attempt to negotiate between the fact that, as Adorno writes, in art and "hardly anywhere else does suffering still find its own voice, a consolation that does not immediately betray it," and the possibility of suffering's betrayal by the stylistic mechanisms which "make the unthinkable appear to have had some meaning." Alongside such highly mediated texts, the decidedly "non-literary" form of the video testimony serves as a site of resistance to what Lawrence Langer has called the search for "rhetorical consolation." Through these testimonies, the men and women who bear witness to the unspeakable challenge, threaten, and have claimed me for life.

Laura Yow

Jodie Morse is a Yale undergraduate, Class of 1997. She has written about the Video Archive's testimonies in the context of several Yale College courses.

To some extent, my personal experience with the Holocaust conforms to the deceptively familiar categories of before and after. Before I came to Yale and explored the Fortunoff Video Archive, the Holocaust lingered among the realm of the unsaid, among those subjects so haunting they bind entire families to collective vows of silence. As a young child, I remember my grandmother cautioning us not to ask about the "funny" way my great-uncle Rolfe talked. We did not know then that his accent was a German one, that he escaped to the United States and was adopted by my family, and that both his parents died in Auschwitz. While these pieces of information emerged throughout the years, they came to me just as I relate them now, as fragmented bits of fact, devoid of feeling. But as anyone who has tried to construct a moving, successful narrative knows all too well, facts alone do not support a story. Indeed, they are but a disembodied frame, craving a canvas to suspend between them.

Beyond its incomparable value as an intellectual resource, the Fortunoff Video Archive, in compelling me to become the listener, has instilled in me a unique appreciation for the language with which survivors navigate the event. Instead of

degrading my family's tradition of silence as an inferior or failed mode of transmission, it has taught me to view the silence itself as a project of a language so brimming with feeling that it often renders fact itself superfluous. Whereas, previously, my desire had been to convert the unsaid into the said, after studying in the Archive I now see the flaw in the very premise of my project. I assumed I could not only find the appropriate canvas for the frame, but that I would then know what to inscribe upon it. In the case of the Holocaust, where the very fact of its existence is so emotionally charged, we need not fit together fact and feeling, or before and after. The most naked canvas makes a statement infinitely better than the one we've colored in.

Jodie Morse

Professor Lawrence L. Langer (Emeritus Professor of English, Simmons College) is a foremost scholar of the Holocaust. His *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, based on the Fortunoff Video Archive's collection, was named one of the "Ten Best Books of 1991" by the New York Times Book Review and won a 1991 National Book Critics Circle Award. His *Admitting the Holocaust* and *Art from the Ashes* have since been published. Professor Langer conducts interviews and interviewer training sessions for the Video Archive, lectures throughout the world, and is a member of our Honorary Board of Consultants. He will be a Senior Scholar at the Research Institute of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum this coming fall and a Koerner Fellow for the Study of the Holocaust at the Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Oxford University in 1997. He discusses the value of Holocaust testimonies:

A few months ago a reporter from the Boston Globe called me to say that he was planning to write a piece on survivor testimonies and wondered whether he might ask me some questions on the subject. We spoke for nearly an hour, and I suggested he contact survivors in the area and also look at several of the videotaped testimonies available in local collections and in the Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale University. He did speak to people at Yale, but as far as I know he never visited, never viewed any testimonies, and if he did talk with any survivors, one wouldn't know it from what he wrote,

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Testimonies are emphatic on this point:

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the luck of one person's staying alive

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cannot be detached from the misfortune of

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another person's death.

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since their opinions about the purpose and value of their testimony are totally absent from his commentary.

It was clear to me from our initial conversation that this journalist had stumbled on an issue he knew almost nothing about. Not surprisingly, the results were worse than disappointing — they were unintentionally insulting, especially to the local Holocaust survivors whose memories he ended up calling into question. The headline spread in large black letters across the top of the page containing his report read: REMAKING THE HOLOCAUST? The interrogative insinuates a possibility that belongs in an account of Holocaust deniers, but not Holocaust witnesses. In a sub-heading, the article heralds a debate among scholars about “whether the drive to get survivors’ stories on videotape is skewing the way we view the nightmare.”

Since the “drive” began at Yale in 1979, one wonders why it has taken so long for the issue to reach public scrutiny. One answer is that few people, including the journalist and most of the scholars he contacted, have spent much time *viewing* the testimonies. Imagine attacking the “drive” to write so many books about the Holocaust — and new ones appear every month — without reading them first.

One distinguished scholar cited in the article seems incensed by the notion that any “deeper level of truth” about how individual victims experienced the Holocaust might be gained from studying their testimonies on videotape. Anyone who has devoted even a minimal amount of time to witnessing recent examples of this oral evidence would dispute this scholar’s superficial conclusion that “early accounts captured the life and death of those who died,” while now “the focus has shifted to ‘How I survived.’” Nothing could be further from the truth.

Another distinguished scholar, whose judgement once more is obviously not based on a careful study of the videotaped narratives, declares that there is “a hidden triumphalism in basing the story of the Holocaust purely on the survivor testimonies.” This statement is doubly uninformed, since to my knowledge no qualified researcher in the field has ever suggested that Holocaust history should be based purely or even chiefly on survivor testimony. Moreover, those who use Holocaust testimony to celebrate the triumph of European Jewry over German efforts to destroy them betray a singular ignorance of its contents. Few witnesses choose this gambit. Testimonies are emphatic on this point: the luck of one person’s staying alive cannot be detached from the misfortune of another person’s death. The notion that survivors feel “triumphal” at having emerged alive when most family members have been murdered is at best naive, at worst misguided.

A third distinguished scholar lists “special characteristics” of Holocaust survivors that “sets them apart from the victims,”

though the evidence of the oral testimonies belies all of his claims. The illusion that survivors were “decision-makers” continues to surface from time to time, but it must contend with the exemplary voice of the witness who vowed that in Auschwitz “you didn’t do; it was done to you.” The belief that survivors “had the ability to endure, psychologically and physically,” suggests that those who died or were murdered did not, as if typhus, starvation, and selection for the gas chamber lay in the hands of the victim and not the killer. The odd notion that those who managed to stay alive were “in the situation of not having to worry about a family” is challenged by the insistence of dozens of witnesses that they survived *because* they had a family member to worry about. No simple rules for survival apply; any effort to design them is futile.

Finally, the idea that “survivor guilt” curtails testimonies, causing some Jews to “leave out crucial parts of their experiences” only proves that this scholar is unacquainted with the testimony of the large number of witnesses who offer detailed information on stealing food in ghettos and camps from strangers, friends, and members of their own families because they are literally starving; or of women who give birth and then surrender their infants in order to save their own lives; or of the regularly reported endeavor to find “safer” work when the result might be to make someone else more vulnerable to selection. Indeed, after having watched hundreds of testimonies, I am chastened by how much — despite the shame and remorse it evokes — witnesses are willing to *admit*, not conceal.

Why a historian would want to impugn narratives about Jewish experience in ghettos, labor camps and deathcamps by calling them a “cult of testimony,” continues to mystify me. Our journalist’s shameful inference from all this is that “testimony is sometimes merely hearsay.” The same charge could be made against any published autobiography or memoir. A healthy skepticism is required for written history as well as oral testimony, but this does not invite us to regard either as a form of gossip.

A deeper question remains, and that is why so many scholars are still suspicious of the value of survivor testimonies. These testimonies are not media events, though they may be made to *seem* so by those who exploit them for commercial or other reasons. The charge that they attempt to “remake the Holocaust” is an insidious form of irresponsible journalism by a novice in the field who leaves unexamined the rough-hewn surmises of the experts he queries and displays them as if they were the invaluable polished gems of truth.

Lawrence L. Langer

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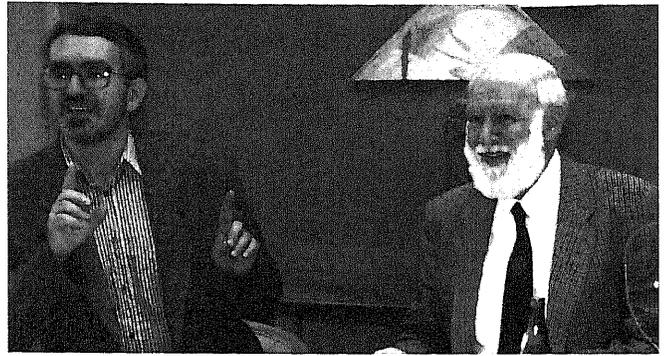
From the beginning, the first priority of our mission has been to record witness accounts of the Holocaust. We give the witnesses the leadership role during our videotaping sessions, and ask them to share their memories with us in whatever way is most comfortable for them. Our interviewer training emphasizes listening rather than questioning, although we always ask for time and place — when it can be determined — and gently follow-up unanswered questions. Our volunteers do research prior to the taping to assure they are familiar with the places and events which will be discussed, and to enable them to ask informed and appropriate questions. We believe this process has resulted in compelling narrative accounts of the Holocaust told by camp survivors, partisans, rescuers, bystanders, escapees, refugees, and those in hiding.

However, it is not enough to collect the testimonies: they must be viewed and incorporated into books, articles, curricula and classroom programs. From the beginning, the Fortunoff Video Archive has opened its doors to scholars, researchers, students and educators. To help the thousands of patrons who have visited the Video Archive since 1982, we have cataloged the testimonies in an international bibliographic database so that intellectual access to the collection is available not just at Yale, but any place in the world. Two editions of the *Guide to Yale University Library Holocaust Video Testimonies* have been published. The Second Edition (March, 1994) contains records for 567 witness testimonies. In the two years since publishing the last *Guide*, we have cataloged almost as many testimonies as in the previous ten. A significant grant from Steven Spielberg's Righteous Persons Foundation will accelerate our cataloging. We have hired additional staff and increased automation to accomplish the goal of cataloging our backlog. We are confident that as the new staff becomes experienced and we develop additional electronic "shortcuts," this goal will be accomplished by 1999.

The cataloging, while a major focus of the Video Archive even as we continue to record new testimonies, is only a means to an end. That end is to assist our patrons in finding the information they need. Working with researchers has been one of the most gratifying aspects of my twelve years in the Fortunoff Video Archive. The list of our patrons' publications which include excerpts from our collection is long and impressive.

Lawrence L. Langer's *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* is the seminal work in our area. Last summer he participated at a conference in Jerusalem focusing on women in the Holocaust. He screened excerpts from several testimonies. The efficacy of the database was evident as we developed search strategies which enabled him to view testimonies for his research topic. His latest book, *Admitting the Holocaust*, discusses video testimonies and includes quotations from them.

We recently assisted seventh grade students from a Catholic parochial school to prepare for the finals of a statewide History Day contest. How wonderful it was to see the eyes of these young people light up as we identified testimonies in the database which related to their project. They carefully used the finding aids to locate portions of the testimonies they needed. The results of their research may not appear in print, but the



*Martin Butora and Geoffrey Hartman talking with interviewers and members of the Jewish community in Bratislava, Slovakia*

pride of their accomplishment, whether they win the contest or not, will motivate them for a long time. Participating with these students in their journey of discovery — discovering they could use the Yale University Library, discovering how to use a national bibliographic utility, and discovering the testimonies of survivors which resonate especially for them — was a thrilling experience for me.

Working with Yale faculty to incorporate our collection materials into their courses has also led to journeys of discovery: for me, for the faculty, and the students. Last year I compiled an edited program of excerpts for a Law School course on "Holocaust Testimonies and the Meaning of Witnessing" taught by Professors Robert Burt and Jay Katz, and Dr. Dori Laub. Professor Burt used the edited program again this year for a course he taught with Rabbi James Ponet on the Book of Job. The excerpts focused on the experience of people who testified at war crimes trials. A junior history seminar taught by graduate student Paul Miller required each student to write a paper based upon the testimonies.

The use of our collection has increased each year. Students, researchers and educators come from far and near. A Masters degree thesis at Oxford University, a doctoral dissertation at California State University Santa Barbara, a senior honors paper at Stanford University, a senior project at a local private high school producing an edited program, are among the ways the testimonies have been used. Others have included excerpts (written, audio, and video) in middle and high school classrooms, at universities, at Yom Hashoah observances, in a BBC radio broadcast, in scholarly journals, in newspapers, and on the Internet. A large range of academic disciplines are represented by our researchers. So many people have learned so much, and none of it would have been possible without the witnesses. I am personally grateful for having had the opportunity to learn from the survivors and witnesses, from the many people who have used the testimonies, from our staff and volunteers, and from the papers, articles, and books resulting from research at the Video Archive. Quietly and consistently, we have made contributions to scholarship and education, contributions which will increase with each passing year.

Joanne W. Rudof

