IN THE FIRST PERSON

The Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library

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In 1979, the Holocaust Survivors Film Project, a small grassroots organization in New Haven, began videotaping the testimonies of local Jewish residents who had survived Nazi terror. *In the First Person* marks the forty-fifth anniversary of this innovative community initiative. Within two years of its founding, volunteer project staff recorded 183 testimonies. These original tapes were placed in the care of Yale Library in 1981, and the collection evolved into the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies.

Today the Fortunoff Archive preserves the testimonies of more than 4,400 survivors from across the Americas, Europe, and Israel in more than a dozen languages. The testimonies of Jewish and non-Jewish victims of Nazi persecution—who survived the ghettos and concentration camps, toiled in forced labor units, fled into exile, and endured in hiding—are preserved alongside the first-person accounts of resistance fighters, liberators, and other witnesses.

*In the First Person* is the first large-scale public exhibition of footage from this groundbreaking archive. Excerpts from nineteen video testimonies present the experiences of survivors and witnesses of the atrocities and genocides committed by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. Accompanying these videos are displays of manuscripts, documents, books, pamphlets, and other items from Yale Library collections. These historical materials bear witness to events from the Kishinev pogrom in 1903 through the Holocaust and its aftermath. They also offer a broader context for understanding the Fortunoff Archive as a continuation of longstanding Jewish practices of documenting anti-Jewish violence through eyewitness
accounts. This exhibition primarily centers on Jewish victims and their experiences, but it also aspires to provide a space of memorialization for the millions of non-Jewish victims of Nazism who were persecuted and murdered on an unprecedented scale for their ethnicity and their perceived racial inferiority, disabilities, political and ethical convictions, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, and marginalized social status.

This exhibition presents the enduring power of the voices of those who lived through the Holocaust and Nazi persecution. For survivors, the act of giving testimony comes at great emotional cost, as they reveal intimate experiences of unimaginable suffering, pain, and loss. In a speech presented at the opening of the archive, the writer Elie Wiesel—a Holocaust survivor and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize—described the powerful drive to bear witness despite the cost: “We want so much to try and give to you what we feel is the essential part of our being, a fragment of a fire....”

Many survivors and witnesses were unable to revisit their painful experiences and give testimony. Those who did were driven by motivations as diverse as their individual experiences, among them: the obligation to speak for the murdered, the wish to commemorate lost family members and communities, the desire to document the crimes of Nazi Germany and its collaborators, and, often, the hope to improve humanity by sharing their experience as a warning for the future.

In their testimonies, many survivors also mourn the fact that antisemitism, war, and genocide did not end in 1945.
At times they explicitly express a deep connection to all innocent victims of mass violence, as did the survivor Jack Mandelbaum in his testimony: “We the survivors understand what it is to be hungry, to be torn away from your mother, your father, your sister, your brother, what it is to lose everyone and find yourself alone in the world. We know, we understand, we have great understanding for the victims of today. And their suffering becomes our suffering.”

The Fortunoff Archive is rooted in the longstanding Jewish tradition to remember and document destruction. This tradition extends as far back as the Hebrew Bible, in which the injunction Zakhor! (Remember!) is repeated as a central religious command. On view in this exhibition is the biblical book Eikhah (Lamentations) as well as other early Jewish texts bearing witness to destruction.

The exhibition begins at the turn of the twentieth century, when Jews in Eastern Europe began to systematically document the waves of pogroms that swept their homelands between 1903 and the 1920s. Later, similar methods of documentation were employed by victims of Nazi persecution. In innumerable acts of defiance, individuals collected and recorded evidence of the crimes committed by the Nazis and their collaborators.

Directly after the war, individual survivors and survivor-led organizations broadened these activities with a burst of collecting and recording. Many lesser-known examples of a rich literature of early testimonies are on view in this exhibition. These works demonstrate how survivors and their advocates began to establish a new field of study.

hurbn forshung (destruction research), which blossomed in the immediate postwar period.

The materials in this exhibit also highlight the judicial dimension of documentation and testimony. From the beginning of the Nazi regime, the hope for some kind of official justice drove documentation activities and subverted Nazi Germany’s efforts to hide all traces of its crimes. At perpetrator trials, including the Eichmann trial and the Auschwitz trials in the 1960s, survivors bore painful testimony. Finally their voices were heard by a wider public.

Historians in the immediate postwar period, who were often survivors themselves, collected first-person accounts of the Holocaust in their research, but it took decades for scholarship to recognize testimony as a crucial historical source. The Holocaust Survivors Film Project and its successor, the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, were major catalysts for a renewed interest in testimony. The archive’s founders recognized the indisputable value of audiovisual testimony for historical research. They also believed that listening to survivors, whose stories were often ignored by the public, is a symbolic and essential act of solidarity.

In the First Person is an opportunity to participate in a similar act of solidarity—to become a witness to the testimonies of survivors. It is also an invitation to commemorate the unimaginable losses wrought by the Holocaust. Not all of the voices in the exhibition are those of victims who survived. A few, such as the testimonies from the Ringelblum Archive, were written and hidden

during the war before their authors were murdered. These testimonies remind us of the millions of murdered Jews and non-Jews whose voices will never be heard. Their silence surrounds this exhibition.

In his groundbreaking work, Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory, literary scholar Lawrence L. Langer writes, “Testimonies are icebergs, to freeze the warm, coursing blood within us—and this constitutes a threat as well as a challenge…. We use books to expand consciousness; we must use these videotapes for the same purpose.” In the First Person, which includes dozens of testimonies and eyewitness accounts, on paper and in audiovisual format, was conceived as just such a challenge.
To learn more about the Fortunoff Archive or to find a list of access cites where you can view the entire collection of testimonies, please visit fortunoff.library.yale.edu.

Relatives of survivors can gain access to their family member’s testimony by contacting the archive at fortunoff.archive@yale.edu.
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Interior cover: Detail of photograph showing copies of testimonies in the Fortunoff Video Archive office at Sterling Memorial Library, New Haven, 1987. Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies records, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.