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Historiography of Holocaust Testimonies

Historiographical Signposts

“Help To Write the History of the Holocaust.” Central Historical Commission in Munich, 1947. Image courtesy of YIVO.

What Is the Role of Survivor Testimony and Voices of Victims in the Study of the Holocaust?

Holocaust Testimony and the Voices of the Victims

Holocaust survivor testimony refers to the personal accounts of individuals who survived the Holocaust. These testimonies can be given in the form of written, oral, or video accounts. Survivors hope that by sharing their testimony, the public will gain a better understanding of the full extent of Nazi atrocities against the Jewish people. They also seek to ensure that these horrific events are never forgotten.

For many years, testimonies of Holocaust survivors were dismissed and overlooked by scholars and the public. Historians and jurists often treated survivor testimony as unreliable and biased, claiming that survivors' emotions and fragmented memories made their accounts an inadequate source for reconstructing historical events or prosecuting the perpetrators.

Only in recent decades have historians begun to recognize survivor testimony—and documents created during the war by those who did not survive the Shoah—as crucial historical sources. This change was influenced by a broader cultural shift, as the public became increasingly interested in the memories, stories, and experiences of Holocaust victims and survivors. As a result, firsthand witness accounts are now seen as a vital part of understanding the history of the Holocaust.

Victims and Grassroot Activists Collect Testimony and Write Early Histories of the Holocaust, 1940–1970s

One of the three milk cans used to store the Oneg Shabbat archive materials in the Warsaw Ghetto. Courtesy of Żydowski Instytut Historyczy (the Jewish Historical Institute).

Many victims of the Holocaust recorded their experiences almost as soon as the war began. And soon after the war, some survivors who were historians started writing histories of the Holocaust in Yiddish. These early documentation efforts and scholarship demonstrate the resolve of Jewish communities to share their experiences and their conviction that testimony is an essential part of Holocaust history. The extensive grassroots communal efforts to document the events and the experiences of the Shoah challenge the misconception that victims were passive and that survivors remained silent for many decades after the war.

- One of the first initiatives to document the experiences of Jews during the Holocaust was the Oneg Shabbat archive, established in 1940 by the historian Emanuel Ringelblum and other intellectuals and activists in the Warsaw Ghetto. Oneg Shabbat was a secret organization that collected diaries, letters, documents, photographs, and other materials that provided a detailed record of the conditions in the ghetto and in Nazi-occupied Poland. The group managed to collect a vast amount of material and bury it in metal containers in the ghetto. Some of these materials were recovered after the war.

- Polish-Jewish writer and historian Rachel Auerbach (1903–1976) was a contributor to the Oneg Shabbat archive. During the war, Auerbach worked as a teacher in the Warsaw

Ghetto. She also managed a soup kitchen where she interacted with many Jews who were suffering in the ghetto, and she served as a liaison between the ghetto and the Jewish resistance movement outside. After the war, Auerbach helped organize and preserve the Oneg Shabbat materials. She also wrote books and articles about the Holocaust, drawing on the testimony and documents that she had collected. She later led the Yad Vashem oral history archive.

- Auerbach was also an active member in the Central Jewish Historical Commission, established in Poland in 1944. The organization's main goal was to document and preserve historical records and the testimonies of the victims of the Holocaust. Members of the organization worked to collect the names of victims and gather information about Jewish communities and organizations and the events of the Holocaust. Much of this evidence was gathered for potential use in war crimes trials.

- Another related organization involved in early Holocaust documentation efforts was the Center for Contemporary Jewish Documentation, established in France in 1943. Spearheaded primarily by survivors, mostly Eastern European Jewish refugees in France, the organization's main goal was to document and preserve the historical record of the Holocaust and Jewish life during the war. The center collected and preserved thousands of documents, including survivor testimony, letters, diaries, and photographs.

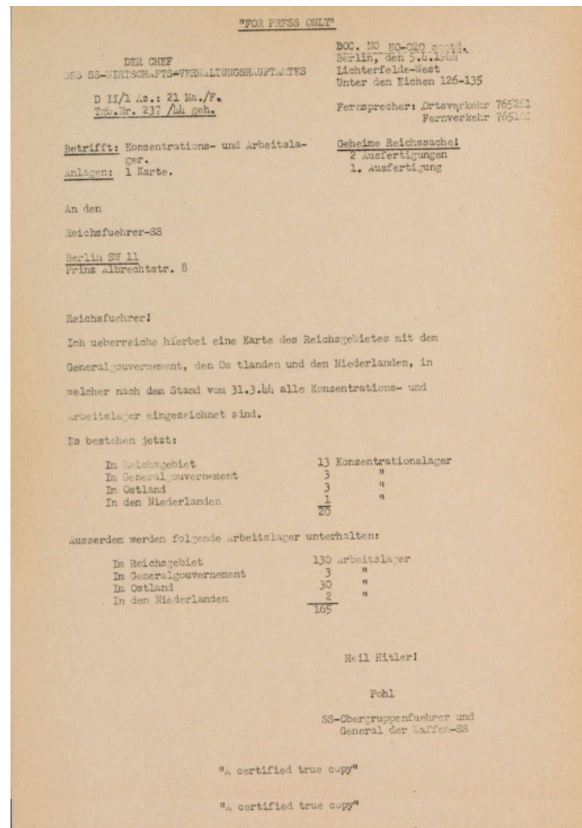
- Early survivor-led documentation projects also emerged in displaced persons (DPs) camps. DP camps were temporary settlements in Allied occupation zones, mostly in Germany, Austria, and Italy. They housed survivors who became displaced or stateless during the Holocaust. One DP documentation initiative was led by the Central Historical Commission, established in Munich in 1945 by Holocaust survivors. Dozens of Jewish DPs worked on this communal project until its dissolution in 1949, interviewing survivors while collecting personal documents, newspapers, photographs, and other visual materials. Moshe Yosef Feigenbaum, the commission's secretary, articulated its mission in 1946: "We, the survivors, the surviving witnesses, must create a foundation for the historian … so that he may create for himself a clear picture of what happened to us and among us."[1]

- The early postwar years also witnessed the publication of Yizkor books compiled by surviving members of diverse Jewish communities throughout Eastern Europe. These memorial books, like this one for the town of Dembitz (Debica), Poland, included photographs, essays about prewar Jewish life, accounts of the Holocaust, and names of those who were murdered. Also during this time, a number of historians who survived the Holocaust, including Philip Friedman and Isaiah Trunk, began writing early histories of the Shoah in Yiddish, from the perspective of the victims.[2]

War Crime Trials and History Writing without Survivor Testimony, 1948–1980s

The Holocaust is the most thoroughly documented atrocity in history because the Nazis themselves kept meticulous records of their actions. Between 1933 and 1945, Nazi officials amassed extensive documentation pertaining to the Nazi state, the Second World War, and the

Holocaust. In the early postwar years, these documents became crucially important sources in war crime trials of Nazi perpetrators and in historical analysis of the Holocaust. They remain important in Holocaust scholarship today. Over one million pages of documentation from the 1945–1949 war crime trials are housed at the Harvard Law Library, and many of these are available through the library's Nuremberg Trials Project.



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Tgb.Nr. 237 /44 geh.

DOC. NO NO-020 contd.
Berlin, den 5.4.1944
Lichterfelde-West
Unter den Eichen 126-135

Fernsprecher: Ortsverkehr 765261
Fernverkehr 7651[illegible]

Betrifft: Konzentrations- und Arbeitslager.
Anlagen: 1 Karte.

Geheime Reichssache!
2 Ausfertigungen
1. Ausfertigung

An den
Reichsfuehrer-SS
Berlin SW 11
Prinz Albrechtstr. 8

Reichsfuehrer!

Ich ueberreiche hierbei eine Karte des Reichsgebietes mit dem Generalgouvernement, den Ostlanden und den Niederlanden, in welcher nach dem Stand vom 31.3.44 alle Konzentrations- und Arbeitslager eingezeichnet sind.

Es bestehen jetzt:

Im Reichsgebiet	13	Konzentrationslager
Im Generalgouvernement	3	"
Im Ostland	3	"
In den Niederlanden	1	"
	20	

Ausserdem werden folgende Arbeitslager unterhalten:

Im Reichsgebiet	130	Arbeitslager
Im Generalgouvernement	3	"
Im Ostland	30	"
In den Niederlanden	2	"
	165	

Heil Hitler!

Pohl

SS-Obergruppenfuehrer und
General der Waffen-SS

"A certified true copy"

"A certified true copy"

Nuremberg Trials, Document NO-20a. Courtesy of Harvard Law School Library, Historical & Special Collections.

In Germany, the United States, and Israel, major early studies of the Holocaust relied almost exclusively on German government documents and did not take survivor testimony into account.

- In 1948, Raul Hilberg, an American Jew often referred to as the "founding father of Holocaust studies," began research for his influential book *The Destruction of European Jews*, which he published in 1961. Hilberg based this study almost entirely on German government records. In the introduction, he wrote "This is not a book about the Jews. It is a book about the people who destroyed the Jews. Little will be said here about the victims."[3] While Hilberg provided a complex analysis of Nazi sources, he also depicted Jews as passive victims whose lack of resistance made the scale of the Nazi extermination possible.

- In 1953, Yad Vashem was established as Israel's official memorial and research institute for the study of the Holocaust. The directors of the institute, among them historian Ben-Zion Dinur, believed that survivors' emotional ties to the Holocaust and lack of professional historical training made them unreliable as narrators of events.[4] According to this view, only professional historians without personal experience of the events could write the history of the Holocaust.

- Similarly, West German historians like Martin Broszat and other scholars affiliated with the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich, founded in 1949, dismissed survivor testimony as a historical source. These historians believed that Jews, as victims, were too biased to record an objective account of wartime history and that their testimony would be used to seek revenge against the Germans.[5]

These historical approaches emerged at a time when Nazi government documents were a key source for investigating the Holocaust and within a broader cultural climate that dismissed survivor testimony.

- The Nuremberg Trials (1945–1946) were a series of military tribunals held after World War II by the Allied powers to prosecute high-ranking Nazi officials. The prosecution relied on the extensive documentation created by the Nazis themselves, and only a few Jewish survivors, including Avrom Sutzkever were called to testify. The prosecution treated official state documents as incontrovertible evidence, while deeming survivors' testimony as inherently biased.

- In 1950, Israel passed the "The Law for the Punishment of Nazis and Their Accomplices." During the war, the Nazis forced some Jewish prisoners to oversee and manage other Jews in return for privileges. Beginning in 1950, some survivors who had served in such roles in the ghettos were put on trial in Israel and convicted as Nazi collaborators.[6] Rather than give testimony as victims, these survivors were brought to the stand to testify as perpetrators.

The absence of the voices of survivors in the public sphere and in professional historical accounts produced during this time in the United States, Israel, and Germany contributed to the misconception that survivors chose to remain silent after the war.

The Eichmann Trial and Changing Public Perceptions of Holocaust Survivors, 1961 to the Present

In 1961, the Eichmann Trial transformed public perceptions of survivors and their testimony. Adolf Eichmann had been a high-ranking Nazi official responsible for organizing and coordinating the transportation of Jews and other groups to concentration and extermination camps. In 1960, he was captured by Israeli Mossad agents in Argentina and brought to Israel to stand trial for war crimes. Eichmann was charged with fifteen counts of crimes against humanity,

war crimes, and crimes against the Jewish people. He was found guilty on all counts and was sentenced to death by hanging.

Abba Kovner testifying at the Eichmann Trial, 1961.
Courtesy of National Photo Collection of Israel,
Wikimedia Commons.

- Survivor testimony played a crucial role during the trial. One hundred eleven survivors testified. They came from various countries and backgrounds, and their testimony covered a wide range of topics, including conditions in the ghettos, deportations to death camps, experiences of slave labor, and acts of murder and brutality committed by the Nazis.

- The trial was the first major public event in which survivors were able to give detailed accounts of their experiences under Nazi rule and describe the atrocities they had

witnessed and experienced. The trial was broadcast on the radio in Israel, excerpts were shown on television worldwide, and it was widely covered by international media. This allowed a large international audience to hear firsthand accounts of the Holocaust from the victims themselves, rather than learn about it through Nazi records and other documents.[7]

The Eichmann Trial spurred public fascination with the stories and experiences of survivors, ushering in what historian Annette Wieviorka has called "the era of the witness." In this new period, personal narratives of survivors became the primary medium for representing and remembering the Holocaust.

- A major example of this new sensibility was the airing of the 1978 television miniseries *Holocaust* on NBC. Starring Meryl Streep, the miniseries narrated the story of the Holocaust from the perspective of a fictional German-Jewish family. It was watched by tens of millions of viewers in the United States and later in West Germany.

- Many Holocaust survivors criticized this series, arguing that it was shallow and one dimensional, and that the life of a German-Jewish middle-class family had little to do with the experiences of the overwhelming majority of Holocaust victims and survivors.[8] The critical reaction to this series fueled—at least in part—new initiatives by survivors to document their stories.

Taping of the testimony of Steven H. and Marion L. (HVT-544) at the Fortunoff Video Archive in 1985. Courtesy of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies.

- One year after the miniseries *Holocaust* aired, a group of volunteers and survivors launched the Holocaust Survivors Film Project (HSFP) in New Haven, Connecticut. This grassroots initiative to videotape the testimonies of Holocaust survivors would eventually lead to the establishment of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. Today, the archive holds over 4,400 video testimonies in 20 languages; these were given by survivors and others with firsthand knowledge of Nazi persecution. Literary critic Geoffrey Hartman, one of the Fortunoff Archive's founders and its director until his death in 2016, explained that the project was driven by the understanding that it was finally time for survivors to have opportunity to share their stories, rather than being spoken for by others.[9]

- At around the same time, French filmmaker Claude Lanzmann was working on his documentary film *Shoah* , released in 1985 and considered one of the most important films about the Holocaust to this day. Over nine hours long and divided into two parts, the film relies extensively on the video testimonies of survivors, witnesses, and perpetrators. The success and acclaim of the film solidified the new approach that emphasized the importance of firsthand testimony in narrating and representing the events of the Holocaust.

- The voices of survivors were also increasingly heard in Washington. In 1978, US president Jimmy Carter established the President's Commission on the Holocaust . The commission's mandate was to produce a report "with respect to the establishment and maintenance of an appropriate memorial to those who perished in the Holocaust."[10] Five years later, in April 1983, around twenty thousand Jewish Holocaust survivors and their families gathered in Washington, DC, for the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors . The main goals of the event were to remember the victims of the Holocaust, educate future generations, and commemorate the atrocities committed during the Holocaust.

- In subsequent years, other large-scale documentation projects were established. The most influential of these included the USC Shoah Foundation, launched in 1994 on the initiative of Steven Spielberg, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which was established in 1993 in Washington, DC. The testimony collections of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, began in the late 1940s, vastly expanded to include audio and video recordings.[11]

Historians Write New Histories of the Holocaust with Survivor Testimony, 1990s to the Present

Alongside changing cultural attitudes toward survivors, historians in Europe, the Americas, and Israel began to write new histories of the Holocaust, making extensive use of testimony. Today, survivor testimony is considered an essential source for the study of the Holocaust.

- One event that crystallized this shift in scholarly attitude toward testimony was a public debate between Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer in the late 1980s. Broszat was a German historian who based his influential studies on Nazi government

documents. Friedländer was born in a Czech-German-Jewish family in Prague in 1932 and survived the Holocaust in France. One of the key questions in their debate was the role of the voices of victims in writing Holocaust history. Broszat dismissed these voices as "mythical memory" and contrasted them with "objective" findings of historians based on contemporaneous sources. Friedländer argued that Jewish experiences and responses to Nazi persecution—what victims knew, when they knew, and how they responded—are an essential part of Holocaust history.[12]

- In 1997, Friedländer published the first of his two-volume masterpiece, *Nazi Germany and the Jews*. He published the second volume, *The Years of Extermination*, in 2007. In this study, Friedländer proposed an integrated history of the Holocaust. He argued that a comprehensive history of the Holocaust had to include multiple vantage points, experiences, and national contexts: the perspective of perpetrators, the attitudes of surrounding societies, and the experiences of Jews relayed through testimony and other firsthand personal accounts.[13]

- In 2001, historian Jan Tomasz Gross's book *Neighbors* offered another example of how historians' attitudes toward testimony have changed. In his book, Gross recovered the events of the mass murder of Jewish inhabitants of the Polish town of Jedwabne by their ethnic Polish neighbors in July 1941. Gross documented these events by examining testimony collected by the Jewish historical commissions after the war. He argued for a default position in favor of survivor testimony: "When considering survivors' testimonies, we would be well-advised to change the starting premise," he wrote, "by accepting what we read in a particular account as fact until we find persuasive arguments to the contrary, we would avoid more mistakes than we are likely to commit by adopting the opposite approach, which calls for cautious skepticism toward any testimony until an independent confirmation of its content has been found."[14]

- Gross's study was part of a broader turn toward testimony among Holocaust historians. As Laura Jockusch wrote in 2012, "Several Holocaust historians who previously had focused on *perpetrator* history—for example, Christopher Browning, Omer Bartov, and the late Hilberg himself—have turned their attention to the victims' perspectives, subjecting their testimony to the same rigorous source criticism as they would perpetrator documents."[15] Finally, the digitization of testimonies—and the emergence of the field of digital humanities—is prompting new projects, questions, and methods for conducting research with survivor testimony to understand the Holocaust.[16]

Notes

[1] Moyshe Feygnboym, "Why Historical Commissions?," 1946, *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,* https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/moyshe-feygnboym-why-historical-commissions.
[2] Mark L. Smith, *The Yiddish Historians and the Struggle for a Jewish History of the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2019).
[3] Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), xv.
[4] David Engel, "Rehabilitating Exile," in *Historians of the Jews and the Holocaust* (Stanford: Stanford

University Press, 2010), 85–133; Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 186–206.
[5] Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe,* 186-206.
[6] Anita Shapira, "The Holocaust: Private Memories, Public Memory," *Jewish Social Studies*, new series, 4, no. 2 (1998): 40–58.
[7] Annette Wieviorka, "The Advent of the Witness," in *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 56–95.
[8] See, for example, Elie Wiesel, "Trivializing the Holocaust: Semi-Fact and Semi-Fiction" *New York Times*, April 18, 1978, 28–29, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1978/04/16/139847462.html?pdf_redirect=true&ip=0&pageNumber=103.
[9] Stephen Naron, "Archives, Ethics and Influence: How the Fortunoff Video Archive's Methodology Shapes Its Collection's Content," in *Interactions: Explorations of Good Practice in Educational Work with Video Testimonies of Victims of National Socialism*, ed. Werner Dreier, Angelika Laumer, and Moritz Wein, Education with Testimonies, vol. 4 (Berlin: EVG Foundation, 2018), 41–51
[10] "The President's Commission on the Holocaust," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, https://www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum/presidents-commission.
[11] Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe*, 3–17.
[12] Martin Broszat and Saul Friedländer, "A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism," *New German Critique*, no. 44 (1988): 85–126.
[13] Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933–1939* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997); Saul Friedländer, *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Extermination, 1939–1945* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).
[14] Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), 139–140.
[15] Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe*, 186–206.
[16] See, for example, Stephen Naron and Gabor Mihaly Toth, "Let Them Speak: An Effort to Reconnect Communities of Survivors in a Digital Archive," in *Mass Violence and Memory in the Digital Age*, ed. Eve M. Zucker and David J. Simon (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 71–94.