Intricacies of History:

Interviewing and Indexing in Holocaust Oral History Archives

Abigail H. Tilden

Professor Benjamin Alexander

Queens College Graduate School of Library and Information Studies

Abstract

This paper examines two of the unique features of oral history archives, interviewing and indexing, as they have developed through usage in several major archives of Holocaust Oral History.

Oral history archives in the United States have become a readily accepted part of the social and academic landscape: interviews inquire after people's memories on subjects from Presidential administrations to the experiences of Dustbowl families in the Great Depression. Weighty topics such as slavery and war share are balanced by local archives on farming or crafting. Yet despite our familiarity with the potential of oral history, there are still times when a collection can bring a new perspective and outlook to the profession.   This is what has happened with the oral testimony of Holocaust Survivors.

A (Brief) History of Oral History

While the term "oral history" is relatively new, the idea is not. Herotodus, the Greek historian, used first-person accounts in his work; Chinese scribes recorded the sayings of peasants, and European missionaries interviewed South American natives versed in Aztec lore in order to record their knowledge. The practice fell out of favor in Europe as theories of scientific inquiry gained prominence, dedicating themselves to writing *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, how it really was. This viewpoint eventually faded, as historians such as Hubert Howe Bancroft began to use interviews to fill gaps they saw in the historical record. Bancroft's work in California, as well as projects such as military historians' interviews of soldiers fighting during World War II, and B.A.

Botkin's interviews of former slaves, helped to establish oral history as a vital and

necessary part of recording history. [1]

Rebecca Sharpless, in her chapter "The History of Oral History," part of the

Handbook of Oral History, describes how these smaller programs grew into

institutionalized ones, such as Nevins' work at Columbia University, beginning in 1948,

and the continuation of Bancroft's work by the Regional Oral History Office at UC

Berkeley starting in 1954. UCLA joined in five years later. Finally the National

Archives came on board in 1961, focusing on Presidential libraries, beginning with the

Truman library. But despite the National Archives' narrow focus, there was a wealth of

topics covered by groups large and small: slavery, the Great Depression,

industrialization, and new movements such as Civil Rights, feminism, and Vietnam.

As the popularity and use of oral history grew, so did the debates over its

definition, and codification of theory. The development of the cassette tape allowed for

easy recording of interviews, but then comes the question of transcription, and what to

consider the original primary source. If the recording is discarded, how accurate must

the transcript be, and how do you deal with pauses, sounds, and other peculiarities of

speech? When videotape added visual recording to the mix, the debate began again:

did a visual recording change the nature of the interview?   And, most importantly,

how do you do it all *ethically*?

---

[1] Sharpless, R. (2006) The History of Oral History.   In Charlton, T., et. al. (Eds), Handbook of Oral

History. (pp 19-24). Altamira Press.

Much of the standards in this field are set by the Oral History Association

(OHA), established in 1966[2], which states on its website that it "has grappled constantly

with developing and promoting professional standards for oral historians."[3] Their

Evaluation Guidelines, posted on their web site, include statements of responsibility to

Interviewees, the Public, and for Sponsoring and Archiving Institutions, as well as

guidelines that cover every aspect of the interviewing and archiving processes. They

also provide information on legal issues, including dealing with Institutional Review

Boards.

The development of OHA's Evaluation Guidelines has been a multi-step process,

beginning in 1968 and extending through 1990, with additions in 1998 to help cover

new technology. OHA explains: "If that process sounds convoluted, it was. But its

many stages were designed deliberately to foster thoughtful debate among the widest

cross-section of oral history practitioners." Sharpless details some of the grants from

OHA and other organizations, such as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA): a

Nebraskan historical society and a New York youth center both received money in 1981.

She also discusses the continuing trends in the field, and the growing influence of

international organizations on the work done by American oral historians.

Curiously, though, there is one major area that Sharpless does not discuss:

Holocaust Oral History.

---

[2] Oral History Association. (2002). Retrieved December 15, 2007 from 12/15/07

http://alpha.dickinson.edu/oha/

[3] Evaluation Guidelines. (2000, September). Retrieved December 15, 2007 from

http://alpha.dickinson.edu/oha/pub_eg.html

The Holocaust and Oral History

The Holocaust is an even that hardly requires definition, nowadays: countless books, documentaries, films, and memoirs have flooded the markets. But this development is one that has occurred within the author's lifetime, three generations separated from the atrocities of Nazi Germany that we now identify as the Holocaust, known to Jewish survivors as the "Shoah."

The television miniseries "Holocaust," which premiered in 1978, was one of the first widely seen depictions of the Holocaust in the United States. Many of the oral history archives in the United States began after this movie aired, as the subject of the Holocaust grew in the public awareness.

Another visual work, a film premiering in 1993, led to another change in the prominence of oral history and the Holocaust: Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*. Based on Thomas Keneally's 1982 book of the same name, it depicts a German businessman who goes to great lengths to save over a thousand Jewish workers in his factory. Spielberg, reportedly, refused to accept any money for his work, referring to his salary as "blood money."[4] Instead, that money went into a foundation inspired by Spielberg's work on *Schindler's List*: Survivors of the Shoah, a "visual history" organization devoted to preserving the first-hand experiences of the Shoah survivors, which catapulted itself into national prominence thanks to the success of *Schindler's List*.

---

[4] Trivia for Schindler's List. (2007). Retrieved December 15, 2007 from http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108052/trivia

Oral History Institutions

Survivors of the Shoah, now known as the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for

Visual History and Education, is not the only or even the first organization dedicated to

maintaining Holocaust oral history. One of the first is the Fortunoff Video Archive of

Yale University, which began in 1979, the year after Holocaust premiered, as a local

organization in New Haven, Connecticut, called the Holocaust Survivors Film Project.[5]

The collection was given to Yale in 1981, and has grown to 4,300 testimonies, over

10,000 hours, collected from 37 organizations over three continents.

The Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive, located at the

University of Michigan-Dearborn is another archive that began after *Holocaust* aired, in

1981. Dr. Sidney Bolkosky was invited to interview survivors by a local Holocaust

Memorial Center. The archive has shared copies with both Yale's Fortunoff Archive

and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC.[6]

USC Shoah Foundation Institute began life in 1994 as Spielberg's Survivors of the

Shoah Foundation. While the inspiration was the suffering of Jews in the Holocaust, the

collection includes interviews from all individuals affected of the Holocaust, including

homosexual, Roma, Jehovah's Witness, political, and eugenics victims; rescuers,

liberators, and witnesses; and participants in war crimes trials.[7] The Institute presently

---

[5] Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. Retrieved December 15, 2007 from

http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/about/index.html

[6] Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive. (2007, May 11). Retrieved December 15, 2007,

from http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/

[7] History. (2007). Retrieved December 15, 2007, from http://college.usc.edu/vhi/history.php

contains approximately 52,000 testimonies from 56 countries in 32 languages.[8] While it

was created as an independent organization, in 2006 it became part of University of

Southern California, which has expanded its mission to not only preserve the oral

history but to utilize it as an education tool.

<center>The Art and Science of Interviewing</center>

Interviews are one of the key arenas in which oral archives differ from more

standard archival collections. Most archives consist of items that were previously

created and are later given to the archive. Even certain types of oral history can fall into

this category: recorded examples of oral traditions that are recited or performed are

presented to an archive in a completed format[9]. Interviewed oral history, however,

must be *created* by an archive: interviewees must be found, interviews conducted, and

only then can the recorded interview be placed in its repository.

William B. Moss, in his chapter on Oral History from *Managing Archives and*

Archival Institutions, discusses the main principles of oral history: never confuse the

record with the original event; the original recording as it came from the recording

device is the archival item; and that archivists who participate in the process of

collecting oral history determine how the its recording occurs. Unlike the completed

items that make up the majority of archival holdings, the archivist has the potential to

---

[8] Archive at a glance. (2007). Retrieved December 15, 2007, from

http://college.usc.edu/vhi/archiveataglance.php

[9] Moss, W. B. (1989). Oral History. In Bradsher, J. G. (Ed.) *Managing archives and archival institutions.*

University of Chicago Press.

be intimately involved in the creation of an oral history interview, shaping its very content.

As archivists have grown more proactive in interacting with their collections for arrangement and access, and in seeking out materials, we have found that the profession has outgrown Moss's concerns: professional standards have grown to guide the archivist.   But what are the standards for conducting an oral history interview?

Archival Methodology

Yale Fortunoff Archive

Yale's Fortunoff archive describes their interviewing methodology on their website. They let the witness (that is, he interviewee) direct the interview, and use questions to set the context of time and place and to help further expand on things previously mentioned. They emphasize open-ended questions that allow the interviewee to choose the focus of the answer, and to guarantee an uninterrupted train of thought, intended to trigger latent or disassociated memories.[10] Yale states: "The witnesses are the experts in their own life story, and the interviewers are there to listen, to learn, and to clarify."[11]

Yale's interviews are a core group that began with the project in 1981, and at that time received eight weeks of training. There is continuing professional development in the form of lectures, readings, critical review of testimony, and discussions of

---

[10] Hartman, G. (2006, Summer). The humanities of testimony: an introduction. *Poetics Today*, 27:2, 249-260.

[11] About the archive: introduction. (2005, May 25).   Retrieved December 15, 2007, from http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/about/index.html

methodology. The goal of this continued training is to develop interviews that are

"empathic and highly informed listeners."[12]

USC Shoah Foundation

USC Shoah Foundation also provides information on their website about their

methodology, including their guidelines for Interviewers and Videographers, and

related paperwork.[13] The Foundation has a Pre-Interview Survivor Questionnaire,

which is 44 pages of detailed questions about the interviewee's background, education,

experiences pre-war, during the war (including the ghettos and concentration camps,

refugees, death marches, and those in hiding), and post-war, such as displaced persons

camps. They even ask if the interviewee has interviewed with any other archives

(presumably to set up cross-references). There is also a Post-Interview form, which

documents languages used in the interviews and has spaces to document spellings for

names and geographic locations; and a final form for the Interviewer's contact

information. These forms are available in multiple languages.

The Pre-Interview Questionnaire is filled out a week prior to the interview at a

meeting between the interviewer and interviewee.[14] This also hopefully allows a

rapport to be established and allows the interviewee to begin thinking about what they

wish to discuss during the interview. The interview itself is generally conducted at the

---

[12] About the archive: training. (2005, May 25). Retrieved December 15, 2007, from

http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/about/training.html

[13] The interview. (2007). Retrieved December 15, 2007, from http://college.usc.edu/vhi/theinterview.php

[14] The interview. (2007). Retrieved December 15, 2007, from http://college.usc.edu/vhi/theinterview.php

interviewee's home, and is not started until the interviewee has read, understood, and signed a Release Agreement.

Michigan Voice/Vision Archive

The Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive does not provide any information on its interviewing methodology on its website.

Academic Examination of Interviewing Methodology

Henry Greenspan and Sidney Bolkosky, of the University of Michigan, have studied the science and art of interviewing in their paper "When is an Interview an Interview?: Notes from Listening to Holocaust Survivors". They gathered a group of what they refer to as "veterans" of the interview process, noting that such a group could only exist within the last decade, as Holocaust survivor oral history programs have grown widespread enough that one would find people who had been interviewed by multiple programs.[15]

Greenspan and Bolkosky believe that "if one wants to understand how some interviews differ from others, theories and methods (as described in manuals) are not where to look. Rather, the place to look is what happens, and what does not happen, in the interviews themselves."[16] Doing exactly that, they asked their groups of interview veterans to discuss their impressions of interviews they had participated in. One of the many comments brought up was one by "Abe," who discussed the importance of being relaxed, and able to think clearly: "...you have to have a certain

---

[15] Greenspan, H. and Bolkosky, S. (2006, Summer). When is an interview an interview?: notes from listening to Holocaust survivors. *Poetics Today*, 27:2, 432-499. (428)

[16] Greenspan and Bolkosky 436

amount of relaxation to be able to concentrate and not to anticipate you know certain

occurrences that, that they have taken place, and put them in before their time is to be

said."[17] He went on to explain that the interviewer needs to allow the interviewee time

to remember, while still guiding the interview.

Most importantly, all of the veterans Greenspan and Bolkosky spoke to talked

about the importance of an informed interviewer, who had a vast enough knowledge

on the subjects in question to be able to judge what was meandering memory, and what

was relevant. The authors described that as acting as a facilitator, helping to maintain

the individual memories while keeping them related to the broader theme.

In contrast to these qualities of a good interview, Greenspan and Bolkosky also

examined what made an interview run off the rails. Both a lack of structure and too

much structure were problems: a lack of structure led to an uncomfortable interviewee,

while an over-structured one cut them short and prevented them from presenting their

story as they remembered it. Several of the veterans mentioned question lists, which

they found "prefabricated and maintained regardless of conversational context."[18] In

contrast, open-ended questions also blocked the development of a good rapport,

preventing a collaborative process by placing the onus entirely on the interviewee. And

underlying all this, an unprepared interviewer who is insufficiently informed of the

historical context will be unable to identify significant answers and use questions to

encourage the interviewee to expand upon them.

---

[17] Greenspan and Bolkosky 440

[18] Greenspan and Bolkosky 443

Mary Marshall Clark, in an interview with Dori Laub, one of the founders of

Yale's Fortunoff archive, learned that Laub prefers to have two interviewers present:

both "to support the lead interviewer and help prevent him or her from being drawn

too far into the abyss of trauma with the narrator."[19] This reflects much of what

Greenspan and Bolkosky's veterans discussed; the interviewer needs to act as a guide,

working to keep the act of remembering moving forward. Having two interviewers

present can help keep the proper momentum, but it is key that both interviewers be

aware and knowledgeable of the content and context of the interview before it occurs.

Defining an Ideal Interview

A good interview requires preparation. An interviewer cannot simply walk in,

be seated, and begin asking questions, and the interviewee cannot just begin to answer

them. In that situation you get what "Agi" described to Greenspan and Bolkosky as

"the whole spiel"[20] -- two people are simply talking at each other about a topic.

Preparation, therefore, is one of the key components of a good interview. A pre-

interview questionnaire, such as the USC Shoah Foundation utilizes, can help prepare

both parties: the interviewer gains an awareness of what the overall themes will be,

and what specifics will be important to draw out; the interviewee gains a sense of the

interview and how it will occur. Pre-interview meetings also allow the interviewee an

opportunity to review release forms and have any questions about legalities and

procedure answered. Most importantly, both people have an opportunity to grow

---

[19] Clark, M. M. (Fall 2005). Holocaust Video Testimony, Oral History, and Narrative Medicine: The Struggle Against Indifference. *Literature and Medicine* 24, 2. Research Library. P 272

[20] Greenspan and Bolkosky 44

comfortable with one another, which will allow the interview to proceed much more smoothly. The interviewer also has an additional expectations – the interviewee is an expert in their own story. But the interviewer must match that expertise with their own, of the history and context. An interviewer who is an expert in the camps will not be helpful in drawing out memories of a childhood spent in one of the ghettos. Yale's use of lectures and discussions is one way to help interviewers reach and maintain that level of expertise.

While the interview is in process, the interviewer needs to choose between open and closed questions, to draw out details and provide the interviewee with encouragement that does not shut down the memory process. Both interviewer and interviewee must also understand they are engaged in a collaborative process. Without the interviewer's questions, there is a speech, rather than an interview.

Indexing

Indexing a recorded oral history interview presents raises a series of questions: to transcribe or not to transcribe? Should – or can -- an automatic indexing program be utilized? How do you control the vocabulary?

Holocaust survivor interviews add an extra level of complexity due to prevalence of foreign words in otherwise English-language interviews: personal and place names, and phrases are likely to appear in many other languages, such as German, Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, or Ukrainian. In addition, some archives, such as the USC Shoah Foundation, offer the option to have the interview conducted in the language of the interviewee's choice.

Indexing Methodology

USC Shoah Foundation

The USC Shoah Foundation utilizes a system developed when the Foundation

was still known as the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. It is one of

the best documented index methodologies of Holocaust archives, with several articles

available. Interviews – totaling 120,000 hours[21] -- are digitized into MPEG format and

coded with the appropriate metadata before indexing.[22]

Vocabulary control is accomplished in several ways: historians and experts are

utilized to ensure all added terms are significant; equivalence and hierarchical terms are

established, creating a thesaurus, which helps prevent duplication; and creating

metadata for each indexing term: "Once a term is established it includes an

authoritative source reference, a definition, and a scope note that defines its usage."[23]

However, the indexers still have the freedom to add keywords as needed, and by the

end of the initial indexing project, nearly 50,000 keywords had been logged.[24]

The indexing at USC is done by hand, because they have found that speech

recognition software is thrown off by heavy accents, foreign phrases, pauses, and even

tears. But one of the most important reasons is the software's inability to determine

---

[21] Crystal, M. (1998, October). Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation: an introduction to its

indexing methodology. *The Indexer*, v. 21, no 2, 85-9.

[22] Carlson, S. (2007, June 15). An index of horror. *Chronicle of Higher Education*,Vol. 53 Issue 41,

pA32-A34.

[23] Crystal, M.

[24] Carlson, S.

context. Scott Carlson's article on USC's program in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* uses the example of an interviewee saying they were forced to eat pork. Speech recognition software and even transcription would not be able to assign the keyword "kosher" to this interview.[25]

Indexers watch each interview, dividing it into segments as short as one minute,[26] and assign keywords as they go. It is difficult work, requiring strict concentration on a difficult subject matter, and nightmares and visits to on-staff counselors by the indexers are not uncommon. The job turnover, however, is said to be low.[27]

USC's program is now patented and being licensed to other archives, but it is expensive – prohibitively so, for many archives. According to Carlson, "the institute spent about $120-million on its project of collecting, archiving, indexing, and making available the testimonies of Holocaust survivors. The cost of the indexing was never broken out of the project's overall budget, Mr. Greenberg says, but it was easily in the millions."[28]

Yale Fortunoff Archive

Yale's Fortunoff Archive briefly discusses their indexing methodology on their website. One of the hallmarks of Yale's cataloging is its dual keyword system: both geographic and content are assigned keywords, allowing researches another layer of

---

[25] Carlson, S.

[26] Carlson, S.

[27] Carlson, S.

[28] Carlson, S.

sophistication in their searches.[29] In addition, each interview is summarized in the

catalog. Unlike USC, Yale does not digitize its interviews, and researchers must travel

to Yale to view them on-site. The catalog, however, is can be accessed from WorldCat

(limited access within Yale's campus) and Orbis, Yale's union catalog, which can be

accessed through an internet connection. So while researchers cannot access the

interviews, they can plan ahead and use the summaries and keywords to identify

interviews they wish to view. [30]

Defining Ideal Indexing

One of the keys of successful indexing is the personal touch. USC Shoah

Foundation demonstrates the importance of not relying on transcripts or computer

programming – essential information can be otherwise missed. But also important is

keeping keywords under control. USC's 50,000 keywords is an overwhelming amount,

despite their best efforts to keep keywords under control. The Fortunoff archive's

decision to classify keywords as either "geographic" or "contextual" is one way to help

the user approach the indexing system – and the collection on a whole, by imposing

some order on the keyword structure.

---

[29] Catalog & Research Guide :: Introduction. Retrieved on December 17, 2007, from

http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/catalog/index.html

[30] Hartman, G.

Conclusion

Holocaust oral history archives are helping to preserve an extraordinary part of history. Oral testimony from survivors helps to fill in the blanks of the official record, and demonstrate the urgency and horror of the time in a way that paperwork never could. The high level of public awareness of Holocaust oral history, especially following Spielberg's work, will hopefully continue to transfer to oral history archives on other subjects, which will be able to draw on the lessons and techniques of the archives described in this paper. Archives housing oral testimony on more recent tragedies are applying USC Shoah Foundation's indexing methodology to organize and index their own interviews, allowing the testimonies in their collection to reach as wide an audience as possible. The procedures being established by present-day Holocaust oral history archives, especially in oral-history-specific areas of interviewing and indexing, are laying the ground for the professional standards of future archives.

About the archive: introduction. (2005, May 25).   Retrieved December 15, 2007, from

        http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/about/index.html

About the archive: training. (2005, May 25).   Retrieved December 15, 2007, from

        http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/about/training.html

Archive at a glance. (2007). Retrieved December 15, 2007, from

        http://college.usc.edu/vhi/archiveataglance.php

Carlson, S. (2007, June 15). An index of horror. Chronicle of Higher Education,Vol. 53

        Issue 41, pA32-A34.

Catalog & Research Guide :: Introduction.   Retrieved on December 17, 2007, from

        http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/catalog/index.html

Clark, M. M. (Fall 2005).   Holocaust Video Testimony, Oral History, and Narrative

        Medicine: The Struggle Against Indifference. Literature and Medicine 24, 2.

        Research Library.   P 272

Crystal, M. (1998, October). Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation: an

        introduction to its indexing methodology. The Indexer, v. 21, no 2, 85-9.

Evaluation Guidelines. (2000, September). Retrieved December 15, 2007 from

        http://alpha.dickinson.edu/oha/pub_eg.html

Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. Retrieved December 15, 2007 from

        http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/about/index.html

Greenspan, H. and Bolkosky, S. (2006, Summer). When is an interview an interview?:

        notes from listening to Holocaust survivors. Poetics Today, 27:2, 432-499. (428)

Hartman, G. (2006, Summer). The humanities of testimony: an introduction. Poetics

   Today, 27:2, 249-260

History. (2007). Retrieved December 15, 2007, from

   http://college.usc.edu/vhi/history.php

Moss, W. B. (1989). Oral History. In Bradsher, J. G. (Ed.) Managing archives and

   archival institutions. University of Chicago Press.

Oral History Association. (2002). Retrieved December 15, 2007 from 12/15/07

   http://alpha.dickinson.edu/oha/

Sharpless, R. (2006) The History of Oral History. In Charlton, T., et. al. (Eds),

   Handbook of Oral History. (pp 19-24). Altamira Press.

The interview. (2007). Retrieved December 15, 2007, from

   http://college.usc.edu/vhi/theinterview.php

Trivia for Schindler's List. (2007). Retrieved December 15, 2007 from

   http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108052/trivia

Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive. (2007, May 11). Retrieved

   December 15, 2007, from http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu/