

Keeping Holocaust History Alive

By Cayo Gamber*

This paper focuses on the role of the twinned constituencies and twinned efforts of keeping Holocaust history alive by making the voices of survivors, the narrators of the “history from below,” available to current and future audiences. As this paper clarifies, the fate of Holocaust history is complicated by two compelling questions:

- *How are testimonies being preserved currently and what steps will be taken to make them available via current/future technologies?*
- *In what ways are institutions making their repositories available currently and what plans do they have to continue to make them available, and, in particular, more widely available to generations to come?*

There is an anxious undercurrent in the efforts being made by current archives and museums that with the dying of the survivors, the relevance of this history also is dying. In order to keep Holocaust history alive, archives and museums are actively seeking ways to capture new audiences through ever-emerging technologies. The effort to stay current involves everything from battling systemic obsolescence, such as outdated software or hardware, to engaging with technological advancements that, over time, may fail to attract responsive, new audiences.

The Mandate for Survivors to Remember and Record and for a Willing Audience to Be Found

Today firsthand testimony holds a central place in Holocaust research and education. However, that was not always the case. Historians did not initially embrace what Tony Kushner called “history from below.” As Kushner explains, history from below is derived from evidence offered by ordinary people, by those who experienced the Shoah firsthand, but who often were not formally educated or members of the social elite.¹ We have come to prize Holocaust

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1. For a sustained discussion of history from below, see: Kushner's *Anglo-Jewry since 1066: Place, Locality and Memory*. E.P. Thompson also is credited with popularizing this term in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963); he argued that the working class were not passive victims of history but active creators of their own history. What distinguishes Kushner's use of “history from below” is his recognition that survivors' voices have become the dominant narrative; their accounts now define what we have come to know as the Holocaust. Kushner himself was instrumental in pioneering this focus on personal testimony. In 1989, when Kushner stated teaching one of the first extended courses on the Holocaust, he determined that “the major focus in our classes [would be] the Jewish and other victims with the emphasis on *ordinary people*. We studied their experiences and responses through a variety of ‘ego documents,’ including diaries, letters, memoirs and finally

history from below because the individual oral histories not only humanize this history, but, as Yad Vashem explains, personal testimony highlights the magnitude of the atrocity by focusing on the singularity of each individual who suffered and/or who died. As Yad Vashem's queries and their answer to those questions reveal their emphasis is on the singularity of each individual who was persecuted:

How should we tell this story? What should we focus on? What are the resources we can use to bring it to life? We should not see the Holocaust as the murder of six million anonymous Jews, but we should understand, rather, that *six million times during the Holocaust an individual Jew with a name and a face was murdered*. (qtd. in "Echoes & Reflections" n. pag., emphasis added)

The singularity of each survivor's account has long been prized and sought after. In the 1980s major oral history projects surged in order to record survivor accounts. This surge was due, in large part, to the concern that the voices of survivors would be lost to us with passage of time.

These efforts to record the voices of survivors also were driven by the survivors' sense of duty to transmit history. In his "Preface to the New Translation" of *Night*, Elie Wiesel poignantly observes: "For the survivor who chooses to testify, it is clear: his duty is to bear witness for the dead and for the living. He has no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory" (n. pag.). In addition to arguing that the survivor must not deprive future generations of their accounts, Wiesel also notes that these survivors require willing audiences who will become custodians of this collective memory. In a similar vein, Henry Greenspan remarks, for survivors, "[w]hatever the specific motives in retelling – to remember the dead, to warn the living, to indict the killers, to document the crime – every act of recounting, really by definition, is *premised on the possibility of responsive listeners*" (49; emphasis added).²

This paper focuses on the role of these twinned constituencies and twinned efforts: the survivors who are the narrators of the history from below and the listeners who are called upon to become witnesses from below for those who were persecuted and those who were murdered.

The Precarity of Testimony:

oral histories which were beginning to be collected in the UK from the small Holocaust survivor community" ("On Listening" 604-605; emphasis added).

2. I would add, in addition to the four motivations Greenspan identifies, initially, one of the most urgent reasons for offering testimony was to help survivors locate missing family and friends. In response to that need, in the 1950s Yad Vashem initiated the *Pages of Testimony* project which was comprised of 800,000 short biographies within a few short years of its launch. Today, 2.8 million names have been entered into a central database that now forms the widely searched *Pages of Testimony* testimonial project which identifies individual victims and offers their biographies.

Storing, Preserving, Archiving, Cataloguing, Indexing, Accessing

Illustration 1. David Boder and his Model-50 Wire Recorder, 1946, Paul V. Galvin Library, Illinois Institute of Technology



In 1946, armed with a Model-50 Wire Recorder, 200 spools of carbon-steel wire, and assortment of converters and transformers, David Boder, a professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology, traveled to Europe to ask survivors of the Holocaust to tell their personal stories.

The fate of Boder's work is illustrative.

Three years after collecting 130 interviews, Boder published eight of his recorded interviews, verbatim, in *I Did Not Interview the Dead* (1949). After its publication, the book did not receive a great deal of attention, nor were the remaining 122 interviews Boder had conducted widely sought after. In fact, the whereabouts of the original wire spools recorded in Europe currently are unknown. Fortunately, Boder had created copies of the interviews. In 1967, a portion of Boder's archives were gifted to the Cummings Center for the History of Psychology at the University of Akron in Ohio. That portion included 48 of Boder's wire spools. However, as Jessica Wapner reports, the testimonies lay dormant given that the University did not have the technology to play them. As she explains, "the wire recorders that Boder had used were obsolete and none of the wire recorders in the Cummings Center collection were compatible with his spools" (Wapner n. pag.).³ Audio specialists in the Cummings Center

3. Other copies first were deposited with the National Institute of Mental Health and subsequently were held by the Library of Congress. In order to address the then-current

“decided to take on the task” of making the collection available (Wapner n. pag.). “They bought a nonfunctional wire recorder on eBay and used the chassis, which holds the wire reels, as a foundation for a new machine they built” in order first to listen to and then to reformat the interviews into digital recordings (Wapner n. pag.).⁴

This account is revealing on a number of levels. First, Boder’s project marks the first effort to create audio recordings of survivors’ voices. These audio recordings capture the immediacy and authenticity of each individual’s effort to recall events and to put those recollections into words. It also is noteworthy that Boder capitalized on the fact that his wire recorder was, at the time, state-of-the-art technology. In “The 1946 Holocaust Interviews: David Boder’s Intermedia Project in the Digital Age,” Frank Mehring astutely observes,

the wire recorder functioned as an effective tool of advertisement for Boder’s interview project. He used the recording device to gain attention by showcasing the power of his technological apparatus. For the people who had been in camps for years, *the device had a magical quality*, and in order to persuade them to meet with him and tell him their stories, Boder staged little demonstrations in which he recorded and then played back the material to great effect: “I would meet a colony of DPs in a particular shelter house for lunch or dinner. After the meal I would ask them to sing and, with their knowledge, I recorded the songs. When I played these back, *the wonder of hearing their own voices recorded was boundless. Then I would explain my project and ask for volunteers.*”⁵ Boder knew that the media device functioned as

technology, the Library of Congress transferred the spools to tape. However, the set they maintained was incomplete as eleven spools were believed to be missing. In 1998, this surviving set of taped interviews moved, yet again, to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM).

4. And the story of potential mishaps with Boder’s collection continues! There was one wire spool referenced in his work but not found in the various Boder collections. In 2007, the spool long presumed lost was found by chance at the University of Akron. Archivists found the missing spool in a tin box that mistakenly had been inventoried as “Heroville Songs.” The label on the box actually said “Henonville Songs,” and were determined to be the collection of songs Boder recorded from refugees at the Henonville Displaced Persons Camp in France. (See: Enders, Jon. “Dr. Boder and the Missing Songs.” *Cummings Center Blog*, 2 September 2016, <https://centerhistorypsychology.wordpress.com/2016/09/02/dr-boder-and-the-missing-songs/>.)

5. At the end of the paper, I will be arguing that there are risks in using technology to attract new audiences to engage with the Holocaust when the technology entices by being entertaining. In the case of Boder’s effort to attract audiences there is something fitting in that they were taken with the magical quality of hearing their own voices played back to them. The spectacle itself is their own voices – the voices from below that subsequently constructed the history of the Shoah.

an attraction that he could channel into active participation for his interview project. (145-146; emphasis added)⁶

While Boder captured the wonder of their own voices, this account also reveals how complex it has been to make individual testimonies – especially those born analogue – available. The eight accounts Boder transcribed in *I Did Not Interview the Dead* did not find a wide audience. Moreover, while carbon-steel wire was state-of-the-art, making 200 spools of tape available to a larger audience was not an easy task. Efforts to catalogue and store the taped interviews – whether the 200 spools of carbon-steel wire or the remastered tapes of the interviews – proved to be precarious given how quickly “state-of-the-art” technologies become obsolete and then lie dormant.

In the case of Boder, however, the researcher will discover the truly rare good fortune that this particular collection of testimony currently is available online: digitized, indexed, and delivered by Voices of the Holocaust at the Illinois Institute of Technology (<http://voices.iit.edu/>). In “Digitizing Holocaust Memories,” Jeffrey Shandler notes:

[t]he website sorts the interviews by various criteria, including the language and location of the interview and the gender, religion, and wartime experiences of the respective interviewee. In addition, the site facilitates the use of these recordings, *which are not of the clearest sound quality*, with transcriptions, translations, and annotations, plus background information on Boder and his project. (27; emphasis added)

While the sound quality may be compromised, on the whole, the fate of Boder’s collection has been fortuitous. That said, Boder’s collection of testimonies raises important questions about the fragility and future of survivor testimony. Those questions include the following:

- How are testimonies being preserved currently and what steps will be taken to make them available via current/future technologies?
- In what ways are institutions making their repositories available currently and what plans do they have to continue to make them available, and, in particular, more widely available to generations to come?⁷

6. Not only did Boder record Jewish displaced persons singing in order to create a sense of wonder, Bret Werb, a musicologist at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, notes that to begin interviews, one of Boder’s methodologies was to ask interviewees to sing, “just to loosen people up” (qtd. in Wapner n. pag.).

7. There are other questions that should be addressed as well:

- What work is being done, now, to respond to the many ways archival practices have evolved?
- How are the individual stories inventoried and indexed? In particular, how have metadata schemas and the multiplicity of digital formats been engaged?

These are questions I hope to entertain; however, they are not in the scope of this paper.

We are now in what is being termed the post-witness era. The fact that eyewitnesses themselves no longer will be able to tell their stories in person is regarded as a crisis point as evidenced by Paul F. M. J. Verschure and Sytse Wierenga's charge that "we should ask whether the prolongation of a witness-centric paradigm has a future in the absence of the actual witness?" (333).⁸ This crisis point, however, may have more to do with concerns about historical relevance.

Conclusion: Keeping Holocaust Memory Alive by Engendering Ongoing Relevance

There is an anxious undercurrent in the efforts being made by current archives and museums that with the dying of the survivors, the relevance of this history also is dying. In order to keep Holocaust history alive, archives and museums are actively seeking ways to capture new audiences through ever-emerging technologies. The effort to stay current involves everything from battling systemic obsolescence, such as outdated software or hardware, to engaging with technological advancements meant to attract responsive, new audiences.

According to Beth Kean, Chief Executive of the Holocaust Museum Los Angeles (HMLA), "We know we're at the point now where young people, when they come to the museum, think, 'Oh, this is ancient history.' We have to get their attention the minute they walk off the bus and make sure they understand why they're here. We need to make this history relevant and accessible to them and teach it to them on a level that they understand" (qtd. in Rottenberg).⁹

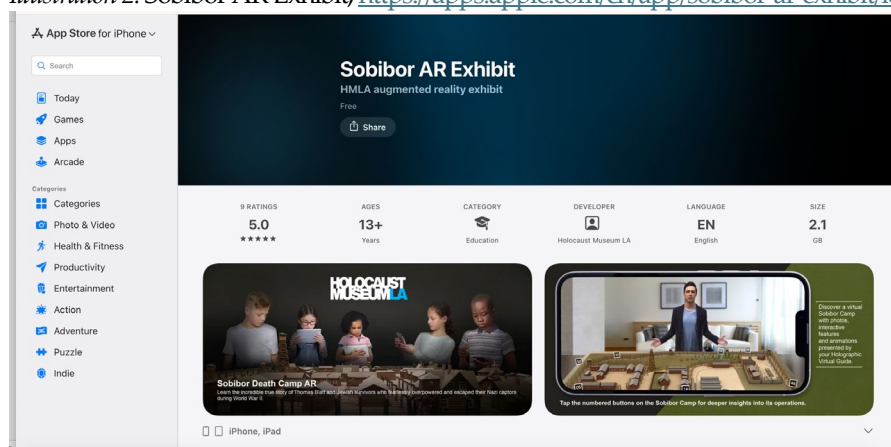
8. There is an unexamined conceit here that in-person interactions with survivors were widely available geographically and over the five-plus decades that followed the end of the war. In actual fact, interactions with survivor testimony, more often than not, was made possible by engaging with collections of oral-history testimony – from reading written personal accounts to listening to oral interviews with survivors – rather than from personal interactions with survivors. Our collective memory of the Holocaust, as Elie Wiesel asserts, has been defined by survivor testimony, testimony, as Tony Kushner argues, from ordinary people who radically changed how we have come to "know" history. That being said, it is worth noting, our engagement with survivor testimony has been derived, for the most part, by engaging with a wide variety of media – from accounts in print to those born analogue on wire recordings, magnetic audio tapes, analogue video tape, and film – rather than engaging with survivors in person.

9. Kean is speaking specifically about the Sobibor Augmented Reality (AR) exhibit. The App, available for free download in Apple's app store, allows users to interact with a 3D model of Sobibor, with actor Ben Feldman serving as a holographic guide providing historical context and encouraging deeper exploration of the camp's layout and daily life. The app centers on the story of Polish survivor Thomas Blatt, who escaped from Sobibor during a famous 1943 uprising and created a detailed map from memory, including key locations such as the barracks, guard towers, gas chambers and mass graves. (Rottenberg n. pag.)

Kean’s description captures a sense of urgency: we must capture their attention immediately; if we fail to do so they will not regard this history as meaningful. However, there is a danger that to capture “their attention the minute they walk off the bus,” the complex, difficult, demanding, traumatic history of the Holocaust is made entertaining. And perhaps, more to the fact, if visitors do not find engagement with this difficulty history easily accessible, then they will disengage. When it comes to addressing younger/future generations, their attention spans are, as Kean’s remark makes clear, a primary point of concern. Current studies indicate that our attention spans – and the attention span of the youth – are decreasing. As Gloria Mark’s research reveals our screen-time attention spans have been shrinking. According to her research, in 2004, the average attention span was 150 seconds, by 2012, it was 75 seconds, and since 2018, the average now is 40 seconds (Mark qtd. in Mills n. pag.). The allure of screen time now is being faulted with decreasing our attention spans and our ability to sustain focus. As a result, the very technology we are using to capture attention, also is being faulted for decreasing attention. In particular, there are pervasive concerns about the ability of children and youth to sustain the focus needed for deep, slow, and abstract learning given their reliance on technologies that provide instant answers and instant gratification as well as constantly calling for them to switch focus.

Since their introduction in 2015, I have been writing about the promise of the Dimensions in Testimony (DiT) interactive recordings with Holocaust survivors. The DiT project integrates advanced filming techniques and artificial intelligence to create interactive recordings of individual survivors. Visitors would interact with the recordings by asking questions in their own words and would receive real-time responses from the recording. The recording’s system uses natural language processing (NLP) to transform a visitor’s spoken question into search terms that are matched with the most appropriate pre-recorded video response which is played back instantly. In order to create the DiT

Illustration 2. Sobibor AR Exhibit, <https://apps.apple.com/cn/app/sobibor-ar-exhibit/id6450016178>

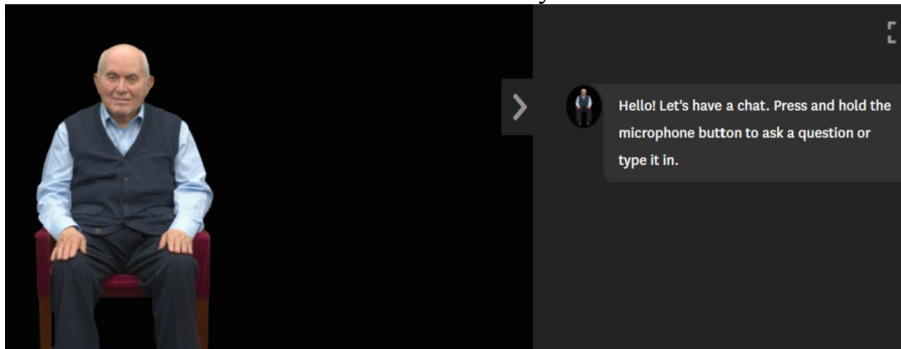


Screenshot by author, 13 March 2026

recordings, each survivor was recorded over a week-long period and asked well over 1000 questions. The resulting recording makes the survivor available to visitors as a two-dimensional figure on screen whose embodied interaction is meant to simulate a conversation between survivor and visitor.¹⁰

Initially, the recordings were available in a selective group of museums and memorial sites; however, due to closing both Holocaust museums and schools as a result of the pandemic, IWitness and Dimensions in Testimony teamed up to make interacting with the recordings available virtually. As a result, today, “[t]eaching with testimony is now more immediate and effective than ever before” (“USC Shoah Foundation Offers”).

Illustration 3. Dimensions in Testimony Pinchas Gutter



<https://iowitness.usc.edu/dit/pinchas>, Screenshot by Author, 18 March 2026

In particular, IWitness and DiT developed “A Conversation with Pinchas Gutter,” in order to introduce students to a recording of Gutter, a Holocaust survivor. In the course of a one-hour activity, using their computers, students are introduced to Pinchas’ interactive biography. Students also “learn the techniques for having a conversation with a survivor and how to construct questions appropriately to elicit personal, historical, and universal thematic responses. By the end of this activity, students choose a creative expression to share what they have learned from Pinchas Gutter” (Grossberg n.pag.).

Similar to the encounter students would have with Pinchas in a museum setting, middle- and high-school students who engage with Pinchas¹¹ “experience a learning environment in which he answers questions as if he was in the room with them. For Stephen Smith,¹² the producer of the DiT recordings, it is the interpersonal interactivity – the conversation between the visitor and the recording – that makes the interaction successful. As he explains, “It’s about you. It’s about what you want to know.... And that is where the deepest learning takes place”

10. A more apt description would be an interview.

11. Gutter was 83 at the time of the interview.

12. Stephen D. Smith is the Executive Director Emeritus of the USC Shoah Foundation and a pioneer in using interactive technology – in particular these DiT interactive testimonies – to preserve Holocaust history.

(Smith, "What Is" n. pag.). Initially when I learned about student-lead interactions with the recordings, I wondered if students might "game" the recording – e.g., by asking the recording irrelevant or inappropriate questions. During a conference presentation when he was asked about this very concern, Stephen Smith was both humorous and adamant in his answer. He noted that in reviewing all of the early interactions with the recordings, there was no evidence of "fifteen year olds fooling around with the technology;" he added that the ones the reviewers actually needed to watch out for were "Holocaust historians and techies" (Smith, "Interactive Video" n. pag.).

While younger users may not game the recording, Neta Alexander observes that to create a productive exchange between "a user and an algorithm," the engagement requires "not only verbal fluency, but also a degree of media literacy and historical knowledge. For this process to be productive, the person posing the question must be familiar with historical facts such as the names of concentration camps, the Nazi ideology, or the progression of World War II" (Alexander 63). It was for this reason that IWitness and DiT developed "A Conversation with Pinchas Gutter" in order to prepare younger visitors with background information that would facilitate the conversation/interview they subsequently initiate, on their own, with Gutter's holographic recording. Wolf Kaiser worries that when there is a disjuncture between the question asked and the answer given "there is the risk that students who are interested in getting new insights can be demotivated by the ill-fitting answers they receive" (Kaiser 84).

Adept researchers are prepared for disjuncture, disconnection, and disappointment. In fact, it is unexpected findings, lack of findings, and contradictory findings that often become the driving force of sustained research. That said, Kaiser's concerns are apt. Our engagements with online technology often are grounded by instant results. The most common example would be that we open Google, type in a question, and receive immediate results – results we often accept without undue questioning. Thus, even if students "learn the techniques for having a conversation with a survivor and how to construct questions appropriately to elicit personal, historical, and universal thematic responses," if Pinchas' pre-recorded responses fail to answer the questions they ask or if their questions do not produce results, their on-screen 40-second attention spans may tire quickly if their questions are not matched with ready responses.

The promise of these recordings is to keep Holocaust history alive. According to Stephen Smith, given that each survivor recording is "not linked to a platform, or a particular software or a particular gadget," the survivor recordings will have the ability to emerge through all sorts of different ways as technology develops. What it means is, whether in a museum, or in an institution of learning, or at home, you're going to be able to interact with Holocaust survivors for generations to come" (qtd. in Grossberg n. pag.). One reader, with whom I shared an early draft of this paper, was horrified by Smith collapsing the distinction between actual survivors and "technological interactions." I take her concern to heart. However, survivors' long-

term efforts to provide testimony – in its many media/forms – has been fueled by their desire to allow current and future generations “to interact with Holocaust survivors.” Survivors yearn for permanence when they record their individual histories in their own voices. The survivors who participated in the DiT project, on the whole, had very little understanding of the technology that was going to be used to keep their testimonies “alive.” They participated because they believed in the promise of this project. They are similar to the individuals who agreed to be part of Boder’s efforts to record the experiences of survivors in the immediate aftermath of war. Those individuals were persuaded, in part, by the magic of hearing their own voices played back to them from a spool of tape. Those who gave testimony did so not only to establish a historical record, they did so for posterity, for a future audience who is continually being redefined by the technologies available to us today.

In 1998, James Young noted that audio-visual taping of testimony shaped our understanding of Holocaust history. As he stated: “[w]hat is remembered of the Holocaust depends on how it is remembered, and how events are remembered depends in turn on the texts now giving them form” (*Writing and Rewriting* 1). There are multiple texts – created by emergent technologies – now giving the events of the Holocaust form. Those texts remained indebted to the voices of the witnesses. That said, there will be an ongoing precarity in transmitting the collective memory of the Holocaust through technology given that technology always is threatened by its own obsolescence and given that the very technology we rely upon to capture our attention may be decreasing our attention. There also will be the ongoing precarity of time, the precarity of a time when audiences may no longer regard the Holocaust as a living history.

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