



Yad Vashem

The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes'

Remembrance Authority

Telling their stories: A race against time

Recording Testimonies from Shoah Survivors

Project No II.A.2.5

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Collecting Testimony

Yad Vashem's Testimonies section began its work in 1946 even before Yad Vashem was established as a national institution. Over the years the department has collected some 120,000 testimonies of survivors. In the first years, the testimony (given for the most part in languages other than Hebrew) was transcribed; at a later stage testimony was recorded on reel-to-reel machines, yet later audio recordings were made and today the testimonies are videotaped.

Many Holocaust Survivors have yet to document their experiences during the Holocaust. Today the Testimonies Department at Yad Vashem is working in a race against time; these are the last remaining years in which we can record survivor testimony, making this a crucial salvage project. Survivor testimony collection is one of the most important components in preserving the memory and imparting the legacy to future generations. In recent years, the phenomenon of Holocaust denial has intensified; video survivor testimonies provide living evidence to counter the claims that the horrible events of this period never occurred. These video recordings are valuable to researchers as well as to youth in Israel and abroad. Through the testimonies, coming generations will become acquainted with the collection of personal stories that compose the broader picture. Thus, the personal story assumes importance on a national, research and educational level.

Whereas in the early years, the main goal of testimony gathering was to collect information for the historical record, today the emphasis is on the personal story of the survivor. Together with documents, photographs and films collected over the years by the archives, the testimonies help to recreate the Jewish world prior to the Holocaust, the anguish and terror during the Holocaust, and Jewish life in its aftermath.

For many survivors, the act of giving testimony is a way of commemorating the names of their family for whom they might not have had the opportunity to grieve and often provides them with a sense of closure. In the words of one of Yad Vashem's interviewers: "They really pour out their hearts – for so long they have kept the memories of their loved ones inside, when they finally tell their story it gives them tremendous relief."

The testimony of Holocaust survivors also reflects a more universal mission. That voice, as expressed in the 2002 Survivors' Declaration, plays a crucial role in shaping the Jewish and human consciousness of future generations, of the State of Israel and of the Jewish people as a whole: "... We pass to the next generation the torch of memory, as well as a fundamental lesson of Judaism: that memory must be accompanied by action of ethical and moral intent. This must be the foundation and the focus of your energies toward the creation of a better world."

Sadly, we have to accept there are only limited years left in which survivors will be able to personally present their story. Through video recorded testimonies, future generations will still have the opportunity of listening to the first-hand stories, thus intensifying their identification with a destroyed world, and strengthening their commitment to Jewish continuity, identity and community.

For all of these reasons, it is Yad Vashem's goal to collect as many testimonies from Israeli survivors as possible, before it's too late. We believe that, provided sufficient funds are available, it will be possible to collect several thousand testimonies in the next five years.



Methodology

While in previous years, recordings could be made 'in-house', with survivors visiting Yad Vashem for filming, today however the frail state of many survivors now necessitates that we send our interviewers and film crews to them around the country at their convenience.

Yad Vashem has set up a 'roving studio', which travels the length and breadth of Israel to film the personal testimonies of Holocaust survivors. A professional interviewer, trained in gently encouraging the story to be told, and also with a great knowledge and familiarity of the specific period and events in question, works with each survivor to create an approximately 3 hour testimony film of their experiences during the Holocaust. The testimony is a personal, painful account of a Jewish tragedy – each one unique and offering fresh insight into this period.

In an initial stage, we will locate survivors, and start with a preliminary intake meeting in which we will collect the basic information about their fate during the Holocaust. After choosing a compatible interviewer we will make all the necessary arrangements for the interview. Following the completion of the interview, the testimony is transcribed. The complete process as described is expected to take several months.



A professional cameraman films the testimony, and the original tape will be preserved in Yad Vashem's archives. A digitized version of the testimony will be made available to the public via Yad Vashem's Visual Center.

Budget

The cost of recording one testimony (including travel of the film crew and professional interviewer to the survivor's home, filming and transcription) is 3,245₪. Yad Vashem aims to collect around 1,000 testimonies per year.

Item	Cost per item NIS
Cameraman	1,300₪
Interviewer	700₪
Digitization	200₪
Transcription	750₪
Overhead	295₪
Total	3,245₪*

* Please note: the actual amount of the donation will be determined by the relevant exchange rate on the day of the donation.