

BEARING WITNESS

The Case for Testimony as a Foundational Historical Source

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When we study history, we attempt to both immerse ourselves in a period that has passed and place an event in its historical context. However, in doing so, we often fail to foreground lived experience – there is a tendency to strip historical events of their individuality and to view them as mere statistical phenomena, rather than as a culmination of experiences. This practice, which precludes nuance, becomes particularly dangerous when we study crimes against humanity, including genocide, ethnic cleansing, and widespread human rights violations. The term “genocide,” for example, a result of its modern etymology, connotes pure, unfeeling mechanization. Thus, our study of “genocide” often overwrites individual histories within a blanket narrative of tragedy. Idealized and simplistic approaches to Holocaust education, for instance, can isolate us from the suffering of those affected, while simultaneously creating a false notion of understanding.

To intervene in this historiographic failure, we must turn to testimony as a method of accessing the past. Only through first-person accounts can we apprehend the experiences of those whose suffering is obfuscated by historical categorization. Using testimony as a critical tool to understand the past, we combat our propensity to separate historical narratives from individual experiences. When exposed to the stories of Holocaust survivors who were separated from their families, for example, we inevitably feel an emotional response. This empathy transcends temporal boundaries, it allows us to understand painful

events beyond their position as remote and unfortunate realities. Through testimony, we can overcome the limitations of historical generalizations.

I was fortunate to learn the importance of testimony during the summers I spent working with Yahad-In Unum, a Paris-based nonprofit organization dedicated to the collection and dissemination of genocide testimony. Poring over American, Soviet, and German archives of the Holocaust, I searched for lost information about the many settlements, villages, and shtetls that Nazis had ravaged in Northern Poland to help the organization prepare for research trips to Eastern Europe. I traced my way through the Wartheland — one of the first areas to be invaded and brutalized by Nazi forces during the outbreak of the Second World War, now delineated as the Pomeranian and Kuyavian-Pomeranian Voivodeships.

In the records kept Nazi forces, each massacre, ghettoization, and destruction is presented in an intentionally detached fashion, with a complete neglect of the incredible violence of the “Final Solution.” Often, entries include little more than a number, location, and form of execution. Just as an archaeologist may reconstruct a shattered vase, I attempted to reassemble the memories of forgotten Jewish shtetls with only snippets of history recorded decades ago. In total, I surveyed 273 former Jewish and Roma culture and killing sites for research teams who will source testimonies from the region in the coming years.

While much historical and contemporary scrutiny focuses on extermination camps such as

Auschwitz-Birkenau, Yahad aims to preserve the memory of the roughly two million victims killed within their towns by the Einsatzgruppen, Nazi death squads. In countless, nearly-forgotten instances, Jewish and Roma victims of the Holocaust were summarily executed and buried in mass graves, many of which will never be found. Since 2004, Yahad has deployed teams of historians and researchers to rural regions of Eastern Europe to interview those who witnessed both pogroms and Nazi killing squads. The interviewees, all of whom are advanced in age, were young when Jewish and Roma residents of their villages were collected, led to forests, and murdered. From these witness testimonies, we can learn, for example, where exactly Jewish town leaders resided and where they were ultimately killed. At times, witnesses have been able to recall the locations of mass graves, often pointing to otherwise unassuming parts of their towns' rural surroundings.

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I was struck by how urgently witnesses wanted to share their memories. Within the next few decades, the majority of those who survived the Holocaust will no longer be with us. This tragic reality provides a fresh sense of urgency to avail ourselves of the most scarce and valuable resource for studying history — human experience.

Analyzing eyewitness and survivor accounts of genocide is not a novel method for approaching the past or seeking justice for victims. The Nuremberg Trials, for example, used concentration camp survivors to corroborate the overwhelming evidence of Nazi brutality and prosecute those responsible. Yahad, however, takes the position that we must study the accounts of survivors and witnesses not just to prosecute perpetrators but to develop a public consciousness of the Holocaust that is robust and attentive to individual histories.

Further, testimony reveals to us aspects of life that would otherwise go undiscovered. From testimony, we learn about social dynamics, changing cultural norms, and daily practices. Testimony also unearths stories frequently left out of historical narratives. In the case of the Holocaust, the suffering of Roma and Sinti peoples is often neglected by imprecise discussion. Highlighting these stories produces a far more nuanced understanding of history, allowing it to shed its clinical and static veneer.

Testimonies also serve as a bulwark against the biases and misconceptions that often follow swiftly in the wake of genocide. While editing translated testimonies, I was able to survey previously collected testimonies of the Holodomor, a state-orchestrated famine and genocide of the Ukrainian people by Stalin in the early 1930s. The Holodomor, like many other dark moments in history, is actively buried under misinformation disseminated by regimes that attempted to disguise their actions. Discerning truth from biased narratives and intentionally doctored data becomes significantly more difficult without record of the experiences of witnesses and victims. Testimony is critical to bringing truths that may otherwise be eclipsed by gentler accounts and sanctioned lies.

At Yale, we have access to one of the largest collections of video testimonies about the Holocaust: the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. The Archive contains over 4,400 digital testimonies, roughly 12,000 hours of recorded material. Created in 1979, the collection presents a unique opportunity to access the memories and experiences of predominantly Jewish and Roma Holocaust victims. A sliver of the comprehensive collection is currently on display at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, and many video testimonies are also accessible online. The exhibit titled, "In the First Person," includes 19 video displays and written materials, previewing specially chosen testimonies that



showcase the stories of both Jewish and Roma victims before, during, and after the war. The astounding display affirms that history must not be immobilized by dry facts and vague narratives.

It is perilously easy to disregard history as irrelevant to contemporary life. As historians, we fail when we settle for a one-dimensional narrative rather than interrogating the vast array of experiences that constitute the past. This is not to say, though, that other methods of learning about the past must be discarded. A credible framework for studying the past must center the human experience within a broader understanding of a historical event. Failure to do so renders any historical understanding incomplete. ♦