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Digital Interview Collections at Freie Universität Berlin. Survivors’ Testimonies as Research Data

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Abstract. This paper presents the digital interview collections available at Freie Universität Berlin, focusing on the online archive *Forced Labor 1939–1945*. Then, it discusses the potentials and challenges of digital curation and analysis of testimony collections within different direction of the Digital Humanities. Finally, it looks at some online learning environments based on these interviews archives.

Questo paper presenta le collezioni di interviste digitali disponibili presso la Freie Universität Berlin, soffermandosi in particolare sull' archivio online “Forced Labor 1939–1945”.

Vengono illustrate sfide e opportunità offerte dalle digital humanities nell'analisi delle interviste digitali. Il paper si chiude con l'esame di alcune piattaforme per la didattica basate proprio su queste collezioni di interviste.

Introduction

Audiovisual interviews play an important role in Holocaust research and Holocaust education, in fields where the multi-faceted survivors’ perspective has been a central topic and where written documents are missing for many groups, places and aspects. While survivors and their testimonies always have been prominent in public remembrance, the imminent end of the “era of the witness” 15. shifts our interest towards collections of their audio or video-recorded narrations. At the same time, digital technology offers new dimensions of accessibility, but also raises new questions of responsibility in handling survivors’ testimonies.

In oral history methodology, the individuality of each testimony is highly valued. Oral historians have always focused on subjective experiences, individual memories, biographical meaning, and cultural context. Any kind of de-contextualization – structuralist explanations, generalizing theories, or data-driven statistics – can be seen as problematic. Given this tradition, and the limited resources in their projects, oral historians usually have analyzed individual interviews, often conducted by themselves. Rarely, however, have their recordings

been a subject of comparative studies (e.g. 12., 13.).

Nowadays, the rapid development of digital technologies has inspired the creation and curation of large-scale interview collections (1., 2., 3.). These digital environments not only allow efficient searching, watching and listening, but also support quantitative and comparative approaches.

The Interview Collections

Overview

Oral history is one of the Digital Humanities core activities at the Center for Digital Systems (CeDiS) of Freie Universität Berlin. Since 2006, CeDiS has been creating or giving access to several major collections with testimonies focusing on the Second World War and Nazi atrocities.

The Visual History Archive of the USC Shoah Foundation¹, the online interview archive Forced Labor 1939–1945², the British-Jewish collection *Refugee Voices*³, the Archiv Deutsches Gedächtnis of FernUniversität Hagen⁴ and the new interview archive Memories of the Occupation in Greece⁵ contain thousands of audio-visual life-story interviews. Very soon, the Fortunoff Video Archive of Yale University will also be available in Berlin.

Some of these collections are only accessible in the library or the campus network of Freie Universität Berlin, others are presented online in new working environments. To make the recordings accessible, CeDiS has created transcripts, translations, online platforms and learning applications. Additionally, its team gives support to users from university and beyond, and is engaged in academic debates through publications and conferences like *Erinnern an Zwangsarbeit* 3. and *Preserving Survivors Memories* 2..

The Visual History Archive

The oral history projects started when Freie Universität Berlin became the first full-access-site to the Shoah Foundation's *Visual History Archive* outside the United States. Numerous German research projects and university courses are using the collection (4., 6., 7.); large educational programs were developed and implemented in German schools 11..

Whereas the Shoah Foundation had not transcribed its 53,000 interviews, CeDiS created 908 German-language (plus 50 foreign language) transcriptions following specific guidelines. These transcripts are time-coded every minute enabling full text search over all 958 interviews 1..

1 <http://www.vha.fu-berlin.de>

2 <http://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de/en>

3 <http://www.refugeevoices.fu-berlin.de>

4 <http://deutsches-gedaechtnis.fernuni-hagen.de>

5 <http://www.occupation-memories.org>

The Shoah Foundation offers the German transcripts as a kind of subtitles within their online archive – if your university has subscribed with the *Visual History Archive's* new commercial provider ProQuest 14..

The Forced Labor Archive

In a second step, Freie Universität Berlin created a sophisticated online platform for a new interview collection on Nazi forced labor. The interview archive *Forced Labor 1939–1945: Memory and History* commemorates more than 20 million people who were forced to work for the Reich.

590 former forced laborers tell their life stories in detailed audio and video interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted in the Ukraine, Poland, and Russia. About a third of the interviewees were prisoners of concentration camps – many of them Jews or Roma. The biographical interviews do not only relate to Nazi forced labor; they also touch upon various other historical aspects of the Century of Camps, from Holodomor to Perestroika, from the Spanish Civil War to the Yugoslav Wars.

The screenshot shows the 'Forced Labor 1939-1945' website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'Home', 'Deutsch', 'Русский', 'Map', 'Collections', and 'FAQ'. A search bar on the right contains 'cpagenst', 'workbook', and 'sign out'. Below the search bar, a red box indicates 'Search the archive' with '38 interviews selected'. The main content area features a profile for 'Bojko, Wasyi', male, born in 1923, with a 'mark interview' button. The profile is divided into 'Interview' and 'Forced Labor Data' tabs. The 'Forced Labor Data' tab is active, showing a detailed biography: Place of Birth (Vasytkiv, Cherkasy Oblast, Ukraine, 8. Aug 1923), Forced Labor Group (Ostarbeiter (from Soviet Union)), Place of Deportation (Vasytkiv, Ukraine, 17. May 1942), Deployment Area (Industry), Camps and Forced Labor Locations (Vereingte Aluminiumwerke A.G. Nabwerk, Dachelhofen (Schwandorf-Dachelhofen); Dachelhofen Forced Labor Camp of the Vereingte Aluminiumwerke A.G. Nabwerk (Schwandorf-Dachelhofen)), Internment Conditions (At the Place of Work, Camp), Liberation Date (30. April 1945), and Places of Residence after 1945 (Belgium, Regensburg, Germany; Slough, England; Hockering, England). A video player is embedded, showing an elderly man in a red sweater speaking. Below the video, a transcript reads: 'In 1942, 17 of May I was taken to Germany to work. We arrived in Bavaria, and nearby Schwandorf, there's called village... ah, don't matter now... anyhow nearby Schwandorf and, ah, I work in factory.' To the right of the video is a 'Table of Contents' with a search bar and a list of sections: 1. Introduction, 2. Life in the Ukraine 1923–1942 (I), 3. Forced Labor in Germany, May 1942–April 1945 (I), 3.1 Forced Labor for the Vereingten Aluminiumwerke A.G. Nabwerk (United Aluminium Works) and on farms, 3.2 Good Treatment by the German Foreman and the Director, 4. Emigration (I), 5. Life in the Ukraine 1923–1942 (II), 6. Forced Labor in Germany, May 1942–April 1945 (II), 6.1 Written Documents and other Memorabilia from the Time, 6.2 Forced Labor Camp in Dachelhofen, Schwandorf, 7. Life in the Ukraine 1923–1942 (III), 8. Forced Labor in Germany, May 1942–. At the bottom, there are links for 'Last updated: 23.07.2017', 'Terms of Use', 'Privacy Policy', 'Team', 'Contact', and 'Legal notice'.

Figure 1: Video Interview with a Ukrainian forced laborer who emigrated to Great Britain after the war, 2006, Archive Forced Labor 1939–1945, za069, www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de.

The collection was initiated and financed by the Foundation “Remembrance, Responsibility and Future”. The testimonies were recorded in 2005 and 2006 by 32 partner institutions in 25 countries 12.. They were transcribed, translated into German, indexed and made available in an online archive together with accompanying photos and documents.

Users are required to register before they can access the full interviews online. Since 2009, over 7,000 archive users – students, researchers, teachers, and other interested persons – have been granted access to the collection.

Research options

Faceted search options allow to filter the interviews for victims’ groups, areas of deployment, places, camps and companies or language of interview. Using full text search, the user can jump directly to interview sequences concerning a specific topic. Tables of contents and brief biographies offer an orientation into the occasionally complex narrative structure and help to clarify the biographical context of the testimony. The time-coded alignment of transcriptions and media files supports full-text search through the audio or video recordings and comparative approaches, for example a study of specific national or gender-specific narrations about sabotage in the camps (see Figure 2).

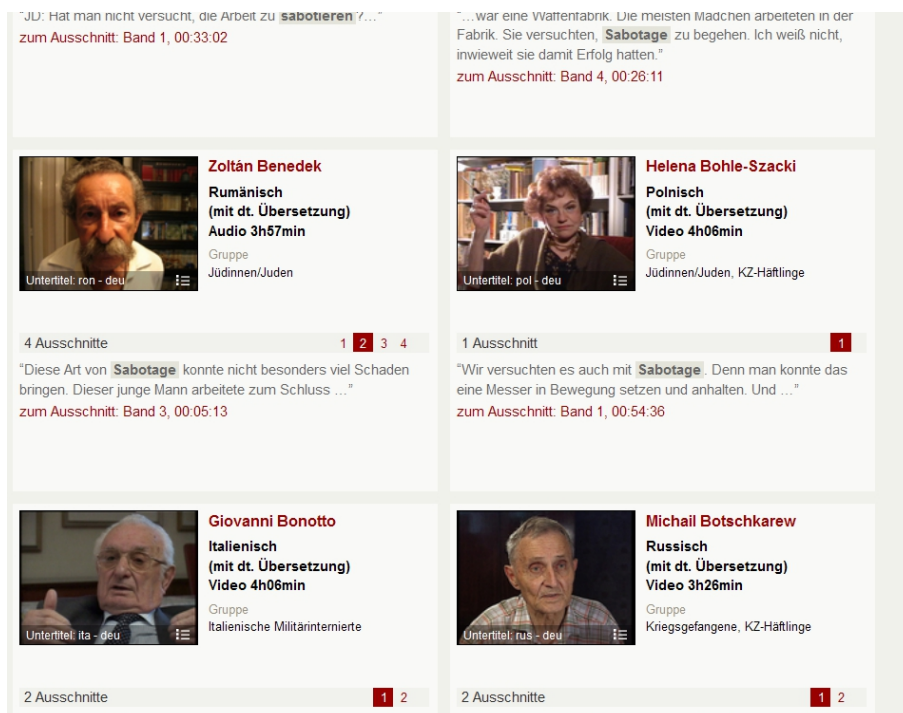


Figure 2: Exemplary results of a full-text search for “sabotage” through the German translations, Archive Forced Labor 1939–1945, www.zwangs-arbeit-archiv.de.

A map visualizes the interviewees’ birthplaces and deployment locations and demonstrates the European dimensions of Nazi forced labor – and of post-war migration patterns (see Figure 3). Using the satellite imagery provided by Google Maps, the user can move from the geographical macro level to the topographical micro level by zooming in onto – vanished or preserved – barracks and factories. Through this form of data visualization, digital mapping contextualizes the survivors’ testimonies within current local cultures or memory – or forgetting.

Contrary to other oral history collections where much research still relies on written transcriptions, the *Forced Labor* archive comes with a time-coded alignment of transcriptions, media files, and metadata, and allow for thematically focused searches and annotations throughout the video-recordings.

Recent developments

The next version of the archive will have some enhanced search options, including a register of persons, camps and factories linked to specific interview segments. When the interviews were indexed in 2008-2011, existing vocabularies seemed not appropriate for capturing the forced laborers’ specific experiences: The Virtual International Authority File⁶ (VIAF) did not exist – and still today covers mostly prominent persons and only some countries; the Shoah Foundation’s thesaurus was too much focused on the Holocaust. Therefore, a project-specific and source-related vocabulary was developed by extracting and standardizing the data found in the interviews.

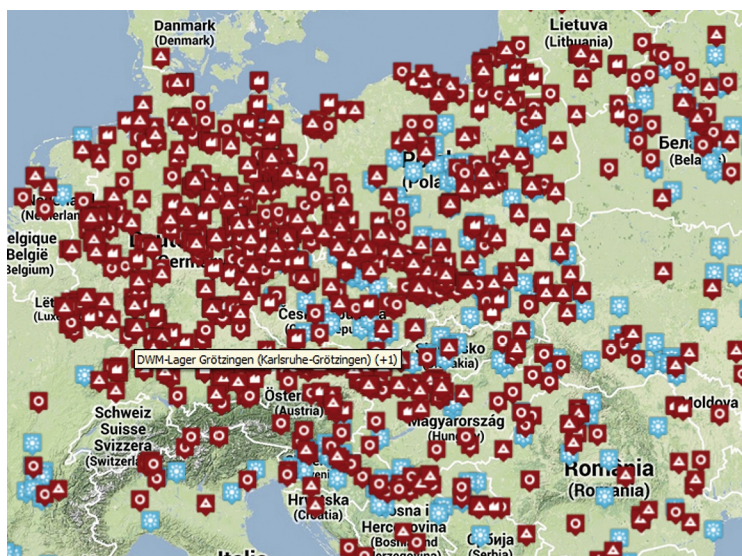


Figure 3: Clickable map with birth places, camps, factories and deployment locations of the witnesses in the archive Forced Labor 1939–1945, <http://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de>.

6 <http://viaf.org>

Recent CeDiS projects like *Archiv Deutsches Gedächtnis* and *Memories of the Occupation in Greece* use the same technology as the *Forced Labor 1939–1945* project, adding project-specific functionalities. For the collection of Greek interviews, the places mentioned in the interviews are referenced with the Geonames database, since VIAF coverage proved too be insufficient.

In the near future, the frontends of all three archives will become responsive for an easy use on mobile devices of different screen size. Still, however, the data of these collections are not linked between themselves.

Digital Perspectives

Digital curation and its challenges

The digital curation of interview collection faces a number of problems. Digital preservation strategies have to deal with constantly changing technologies, standards and file formats in order to pursue an affordable sustainability.

Online archives enhance the accessibility of testimonies, but have to respect the narrators' privacy rights when dealing with sensitive biographical narrations. Every collection has different – and often not well-defined – ethic and legal restrictions.

Indexation and full-text search make the long recordings accessible, but require the huge effort of manual transcriptions. Even though automatic speech recognition technology has made considerable progress in recent years, the poor recording quality of many oral history testimonies limits the usability of automatically generated transcriptions.

Future goals will include the discussion and dissemination of interoperable metadata standards, long-term preservation strategies, comparable transcription and indexing guidelines, together with corresponding software tools to support labor-intensive curation processes.

If digital interview archives can gradually achieve some of these goals, well known in the wider context of Digital Humanities, they hold a rich potential for new and interdisciplinary research approaches. Three possible directions will be outlined in the following paragraphs.

Cross-collection search

Digital archives allow comparative studies within a single collection. A cross-collection search is difficult, however, since different collections are not linked through a meta-catalogue. Especially in Germany, the interview collections, often run by under-funded non-governmental initiatives, have very different cataloguing systems and metadata schemas; many interviews have not even been digitized.

But even for the digital archives developed at CeDiS, the application of long-term open linked data strategies proved to be difficult, because of very limited time frames, different thematic contexts or restrictive access conditions in the various projects. In the future, however, we will

assign a Digital Object Identifiers (DOI) to each interview and make some basic, anonymized metadata harvestable. Thus, we will enhance the visibility of the collections in generic archival portals like Archivportal-D, language corpus registries like the Virtual Language Observatory or cultural heritage catalogues like the Europeana. The different domains of archives, language and heritage – not to mention film or Holocaust research – are working with diverse metadata standards. Many of them are not very adequate for oral history interviews. The rather flexible Component Metadata Initiative (CMDI) framework with its Oral History profile might provide an interoperable solution, however.

In a separate project, the CeDiS team explores the chances of linking interview data by creating a cross-collection catalogue of audio- or video-recorded testimonies. This pilot is being developed within in the HERA-funded project “Accessing Campscapes”, which studies the contested transformation of former Nazi und Stalinist camps into sites of remembrance with approaches from contemporary archeology, oral history and memory research⁷.

Freie Universität Berlin collects metadata of audio- and video-recorded interviews about several exemplary concentration camps in different collections. To give an example, survivors’ testimonies about the Polizeiliches Judendurchgangslager Westerbork can be found at Westerbork Memorial (ca. 200), in the Visual History Archive (ca. 700), the Fortunoff Archive (ca. 70), the Forced Labor Archive (9), the USHMM Washington (3), the Frauen von Ravensbrück video archive (2), Bergen-Belsen Memorial and other institutions. A cross-collection catalogue, similar to the “Database of Greek-Jewish Holocaust Survivors’ Testimonies”⁸ would support comparative studies over all these collections.

Various project have interviewed different survivor groups at different times; some narrators have given several testimonies. Such a cross-collection database can support comparative studies, point the researcher to prominent as well as forgotten survivor narratives, and help in researching the contested pasts of these places.

Creating such a catalogue, however, faces various challenges – like different curation strategies, heterogeneous metadata and restricted access to various collections. The pilot of the “Campscapes” project will only collect metadata of some selected institutions at a certain point in time. A central directory of oral history sources, which harvests the growing number of databases at individual institutions automatically, remains a future goal.

Corpus linguistics

The digital interview archives are aimed at historians, educators, and the general public, supporting the qualitative and hermeneutic study of individual testimonies. Therefore, no tools for corpus-linguistic, data-driven or other quantitative analyses had been integrated. Given the growing importance of Digital Humanities approaches, however, such tools can provide a future perspective for oral historians and their collections.

7 <http://www.campscapes.org>

8 <http://gjst.ha.uth.gr/el/>

Searching for keywords in context over large interview corpora could detect patterns of experience, memory and narration and might be used for many research questions: Are women narrating their survival in a different way than men? In which context do former forced laborers use the term 'slave labor' for their own experience? Or how does the hidden dialogue with the interviewer work while giving testimony?

Some preliminary studies have proved that the interview archives can be very useful for this kind of research – even before applying such quantitative methods (8., 9., 10.). The narrative patterns detected with a digitally supported analysis will have to be interpreted through a careful listening to individual testimonies, combining data-driven research with qualitative-hermeneutic approaches.

Closer to the sources

The digitized perception of historical sources usually implies a higher degree of abstraction on an intellectual and sensual level because the material and embodied dimensions of the past are lost. When the researcher watches a survivor's recording on the screen, instead of listening to him/her in person, he/she obviously misses a lot of context – what was said before the recording, how the apartment looked or smelled like etc.

While interview protocols and set photos are available for many interviews, every secondary analysis will have to cope with a loss of contextual knowledge. On the relational or emotional level, the researcher will find him-/herself in a much more distanced, neutral state of mind, which might limit – or enhance – his/her analytical interpretation of the testimony. In the educational context, this reduction of aura is even more important.

The digital de-contextualization gets more profound, when the researcher uses a digital environment to search interview segments about a specific topic instead of listening to complete testimonies. He/she can find and copy some nice quotations but will not understand their meaning correctly without knowing their context within the whole testimony.

While de-contextualization is inherent to digital research, digital environments for oral history allow to work much closer to the audio-visual historical source. In the age of the tape recorder, the oral historian usually worked with a textual representation of the recording in the form of a verbatim or lightly edited transcript. This analysis of a written approximation to the spoken word often neglects the non-verbal dimensions of the testimonies.

Nowadays, digital technology offers the possibility to study the audio-visual sources themselves, including the multiple modalities of text, speech, silence, gestures and facial expressions captured in the video images and the audio track. Of course, earlier studies have already done such an analysis, but usually limited to a few of the scholar's own interviews. Digital collections make it much easier to study the non-verbal communication on a larger scale, even if automatic gesture recognition is still not working well enough for any serious research. Given their text-oriented research tradition, historians now have to take up new approaches in analyzing these multimodal sources of memory.

Learning with Testimonies

To assess and contextualize interviews properly as a historical source, is not only an academic goal, but also important in the educational context. Therefore, CeDiS has developed interview-based learning environments in different languages. History education experts, teachers and students were significantly involved in the conceptualization of the online platforms *Zwangsarbeit 1939-1945* and *Zeugen der Shoah* in German language⁹. CeDiS is also creating learning environments for the Czech Republic (with the NGO *Živá pamět*/Living Memory in Prague), Russia (with the Regional Center for Oral History at High Tech University in Voronezh) and with Poland (with NGO KARTA in Warsaw).

The environments are aimed at 14- to 18-years old students and address various learning scenarios: the teacher-centered classroom, interactive work in the computer lab, and individual exam preparations. Instead of grouping thematic video clips, they focus on the witnesses’ biographies and contextualize them with background information, photos, documents, a glossary and a time-line. Carefully designed tasks help students to deconstruct the conditions of the interview setting and actively listen to, analyze, and reconstruct the biographical narrations. Teachers and students can also raise own questions and are invited to reflect on the character of a virtually “encounter” with a videotaped witness.

Lernen mit Interviews ZWANGSARBEIT
1939-1945 | BILDUNG

Helena Bohle-Szacki i Eine deutsch-jüdische Polin in KZ und Emigration

Aufgaben

KENNENLERNEN

Was erzählt Helena Bohle-Szacki über ihr Leben?
i ☆

VERTIEFEN - AUFGABEN ZUR WAHL

Deutsche? Jüdin? Polin?
i ☆ Für Klasse 10 b geeignet

Im KZ-Außenlager - einen Artikel verfassen
i ☆

„Wir spielten Sabotage“ - Möglichkeiten des Widerstehens
i Didaktischer Kommentar

Helena Bohle-Szacki hat die Erfahrungen der Verfolgung auch künstlerisch verarbeitet. Sieben Grafiken aus unterschiedlichen Perioden ihres Schaffens stehen hier zusammen mit einem Methoden-Tipp zur Grafikanalyse bereit. In dieser Aufgabe, die auch Fächer verbindend bearbeitet werden kann,

Kün i

Kapitelübersicht	Transkript	Übersetzung
00:00	Prolog (1)	
00:45	Kindheit und Besatzung in Ostpolen (2)	
06:44	Verhaftung durch die Gestapo (3)	
09:13	KZ Ravensbrück und Außenlager Helmbrechts (4)	
14:39	Todesmarsch, Befreiung und Heimkehr (5)	
18:00	Arbeit als Modedesignerin und Emigration (6)	
22:40	Kurzbiografie (7)	

Figure 4: A testimony film with tasks and teachers’ comments in the German online environment Lernen mit Interviews, www.lernen-mit-interviews.de.

9 <http://www.lernen-mit-interviews.de>

Video interviews can never be a substitute for personal encounters with survivors. On the other hand, digital environments allow students to engage more individually with the narrations. They can stop at difficult sentences and replay them; they can interrupt the narration by asking questions or voicing doubts to their teacher or peers – something that many of them would not dare in a live encounter with a survivor. Seen from this perspective, the in-depth interaction with a video testimony may be the best contemporary method for critical learning about the Holocaust and its legacy.

Conclusion

In the 21st century, enhanced storage and software capacities allowed for the creation of digital environments for large interview collections. Oral history and Holocaust research can profit from the developments in Digital Humanities. The interview archives at Freie Universität Berlin open up new possibilities for searching, watching and analyzing survivor testimonies.

This kind of digital presentation obviously influences our ways of perceiving the testimonies. With reference to Walter Benjamin, Andree Michaelis has written about the “testimony in the age of mechanical reproduction” (6., p. 243). Within Digital Humanities, we should also discuss, what happens to the testimony and its aura in the digital age.

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