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Oral History at the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre

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This article deals with the context of research discussed in the previous paper on videotestimonies of Holocaust survivors at the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre in Melbourne. Interest in recording these testimonies has grown hugely in the past few decades, and factors contributing to this development are discussed. The background of the Melbourne centre, its objectives and achievements are provided, together with details of research projects undertaken on the collection. There has been an evolution in recording technology from audio to video, and work being undertaken to compile a qualitative database to facilitate such research is described.

Like Jewish communities throughout the world, Melbourne's Jewish community takes seriously the traditional Jewish injunction 'zachor'-‘remember’. There is of course much in Jewish history to remember and myriad ways in which acts of remembrance may be performed. A central place in Jewish memory from the second half of the twentieth century has of course been accorded to the Holocaust or Shoah, even if there was an initial reluctance in the first decades after the event to open still-raw wounds. As the willingness, if not the demand, to recall the events of wartime Europe has increased with time, oral history has come to occupy centre stage in that process.

Melbourne is no exception in that regard; its experiences reflect similar developments in other parts of the world, where the desire to recall and record the testimonies of Holocaust survivors has grown hugely in the past few decades, while the technological tools of oral history have developed in such a way as to accommodate this so-called 'memory boom'. The growing interest has in some quarters been attributed to the occurrence of particular events which have acted as triggers or catalysts. Some point to the impact of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and other legal proceedings in Germany in the 1960s, which by their very nature incorporated oral testimony and, moreover, drew the world's attention to it. Others point to seminal cultural events, such as the screening in the United States, and then shortly afterwards in Germany, of the multi-part television series Holocaust, which, like Roots before it, drew massive popular attention to historical events which hitherto had occupied strangely marginal positions in mainstream historical narratives. Some years later followed Steven Spielberg, whose film Schindler's List confirmed that the Holocaust was now widely considered an event central to the understanding of the history of the twentieth century as a whole.

Others have looked beyond events to generational factors in explaining the interest in Holocaust memory. The argument runs that these factors affect both survivors and others. For a good part of their lives many of the survivors wanted to put their experiences behind them, to avoid confrontation with traumatic pasts and to focus their energies on the present and the future. That typically meant a preoccupation with work and family. But as the survivors' families grew up and they retired, their thoughts have turned to their pasts. In many cases they were eager that the stories, and the lessons they believed inherent in them, needed to be preserved for posterity. At the same time non-survivors became aware that the generation of survivors was dying out, and that if their testimonies were not recorded soon then an invaluable resource would be lost forever.

As it happened, the intervention of Spielberg played a role in this realm also. After making Schindler's List he set up the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, an organization devoted to the recording of the videotestimonies of Holocaust survivors. Altogether the Foundation from its beginnings in 1994 has videotaped more than 50,000 testimonies, given in 32 languages by people living in 56 countries. The vast majority—some 90 per cent—are Holocaust survivors, but the collection extends also to videotestimonies provided by Jehovah's Witnesses, Sinti and Roma, homosexuals, political prisoners, and survivors of eugenics policies, rescuers, aid providers, liberators, and war crimes trials participants. Though the Shoah Foundation offers oral historians the largest collection of Holocaust testimonies, it was by no means the first of such projects. Earlier attempts had been undertaken in many parts of the world, especially in Europe, Israel, the United States and Australia.
Where the Shoah Foundation commenced its project in 1994, at a time when videotestimony had established itself as the favoured form of collecting testimony, some of the earlier projects reflect a reliance on—if not preference for—audio recordings.

The evolution of the testimony project carried out in Melbourne reflects these technological changes. The project was conceived under the aegis of the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre (JHMRC) in Elsternwick, an institution which itself had been born out of the desire within Melbourne’s Jewish community to formalize Holocaust remembrance at a time when such remembrance was gaining momentum worldwide. It was established in 1984 under Yad Vashem patronage and on the initiative of two locally-based Jewish organizations, Kadimah and The Association of Polish Jews. Some members of those organizations were themselves survivors, and, following a pattern visible in other parts of the world at a similar time, it was those survivors whose efforts were decisive. Their motivations were well expressed by one of their number, Harry Redner, who wrote:

We will be gone and take our memories down with us into the grave. But this part of ourselves will survive for you and those who come after you to cherish. This is not a resting place for these remains of our dead.

Redner’s words highlighted a memorial function with clear overtones of the sacred, though in reality the Centre has been able to fill a number of functions. A museum was installed with a permanent exhibition devoted to the Holocaust. The premises provided the community with a site for the collective observance of the by that time internationally established, annual Holocaust Remembrance Day (Yom Hashoah), and through the creation of a library and archive. The latter, in combination with the museum, are indicative of the institution’s role in extending its work into the area of education, an indication of the gradual but necessary adjustment to the needs of younger generations.

Though dwarfed by the much larger Spielberg collection, the Melbourne collection of over 1,300 is nonetheless impressive in its scale. That is due in part to a geographical anomaly, and that is that Melbourne, so far removed from the sites of the Holocaust, had a high proportion of Holocaust survivors in its population. In fact, the anomaly is less surprising than it might first appear, since many survivors made their way to Australia after the Second World War partly because it was so far away. The first recording of testimonies took place in the 1980s and was on audio-tape. Then the shift to videotape occurred, so that the overwhelming majority of the testimonies held in the collection are videotestimonies.

The beginnings of the oral history activities of the JHMRC lie in a suggestion made in 1987 leading to the recording of the first audio testimonies. The driving force for the greatest part of the life of the project has been Phillip Maisel, the Coordinator and Director of the Testimonies Department at the Museum. Under his guidance the change was made from audio to video testimony in 1992 and the schedule of recordings was increased to five a week. Although the Polish Jewish community in Melbourne through Kadimah and the Association of Polish Jews provided much of the initiative for the establishment of the JHMRC, for Maisel the goal was to produce a collection which was drawn from the full gamut of Victorian Jewry.

Despite the size and value of the collection, it has remained an underused resource for oral historians in Australia and elsewhere. Although it has been tapped by university students and researchers, it still constitutes a resource whose value is largely in its potential rather than its use to date.

That changed to some extent four years ago when, together with Deakin University, the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre was awarded an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant bearing the title ‘Analysing Testimonies of Jewish Holocaust Survivors’. The terms of the grant envisaged that two academic historians from Deakin University, Michele Langfield and Pam Maclean, one from Flinders University in South Australia, Peter Monteath, and one doctoral student would conduct research collaboratively with the JHMRC and in particular Phillip Maisel. The position of doctoral candidate was advertised and awarded to Amelia Klein, an Honours graduate from the University of Sydney. Research assistantship positions were filled by Janette Sato and Donna-Lee Frieze.

All of the participants in the project conducted research whose common element was that videotestimonies in the Melbourne collection provided the key primary sources. Beyond that though, it is some indication of the range of research which oral history sources can promote that the research produced covered a quite eclectic range of enquiry. Pam Maclean pursued interests in the distinctive narrative structures of survivor videotestimony, while Michele Langfield, a migration historian, devoted attention to the testimonies of those who came to Australia as refugees before, and as migrants after, the Second World War. Both engaged with ethical and methodological issues relating to the collection and use of videotestimonies. Peter Monteath was interested in the experiences of so-called ‘Mischlinge’ and ‘Non-Aryan Christians’ in videotestimony. Amelia Klein’s work on her doctoral thesis, due for submission in 2006, by contrast pushed well beyond the discipline of history. She was especially interested in issues of generational transfer and legacy, particularly as they concern the so-called ‘third generation’, that is, the generation of the children of the survivors’ children. In adopting this focus it moves from history into such realms as sociology and social psychology. Preliminary findings of the team have been presented at a number of conferences including a special one-day colloquium devoted to the project held at the JHMRC in December 2005.
It was not the intention of the JHMRC's collaboration with academics to expand further the collection or to alter the way in which the process of recording was performed. Indeed, the collection of videotestimonies continued through the period of the project just as it had in previous years. However, integral to the project was the process of digitizing a portion of the collection.

Before the Linkage Project commenced the JHMRC had initiated the process of copying fragile videotapes onto digital formats on DVDs. This process is still continuing. All current interviews are recorded using a digital video camera. Digitization has facilitated a further aspect of the project—the use of the Atlas.ti software to create a qualitative database to assist the researcher systematically to manage massive quantities of data. Given the emergence of video as the primary recording method in oral history, an exciting feature of this program is that it enables the researcher to code directly from the digitized video image rather than from a written transcription. Researchers can also click on individual codes to load the relevant video segment. A further strength of the powerful Atlas.ti program is that it facilitates the mapping of interrelationships between codes to assist in the formulation of hypotheses about the data. It is important to note, however, that the research team has not been able to work directly from the DVDs held in the JHMRC. The DVDs have been converted to MPEG formats stored on servers at Deakin University.

For the reasons outlined above, the digitized section of the collection offers particular advantages to the oral historian. However, access is by no means limited to that section, though it is by no means universal, as restrictions are placed on videotestimonies according to the interviewees' wishes. Unfortunately, there is no online catalogue by which historians might gain detailed information on the holdings externally, though each interview is accompanied by a proforma recording basic details of the interviewee's background and life history. For oral historians wishing to use the collection, relevant information can be elicited directly from Phillip Maisel at the JHMRC in Elsternwick.

NOTES

1 On the work of the Shoah Foundation, the scope of the collection and access to its catalogue see the website www.usc.edu/schools/college/vhi/

2 Harry Redner in JHMRC, Opening Program, 4 March 1984, p.2.