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Maclean, Pam 2009, Will these glasses help? Holocaust videotestimony and the transfer of intangible heritage, *Historic environment*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 42-47.

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'Will these glasses help?'

Holocaust Videotestimony and the Transfer of Intangible Heritage¹

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Abstract

An analysis of Erica's videotestimony, presented at the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre in Melbourne, reveals how audio-visual history can act as a medium for the transfer of cultural heritage, despite claims that the trauma of the Holocaust has destroyed the possibility of any meaningful transmission. It is argued that the discussion of personal photographs from before and after the Holocaust forms a key component of the videotestimony and constitutes the primary mechanism for intergenerational transfer of Jewish communal heritage. Transfer is further facilitated by the interviewer, whose questioning explicitly encourages Erica to reflect on issues of cultural continuity. Significantly, Erica's answers do not always conform to the interviewer's expectations about Jewish communal and religious identification and this can result in tension between the two. Here too the photographs play an important role in resolving tension between Erica and the interviewer.

Introduction

When presenting audio-visual testimonies Holocaust survivors are often encouraged to contextualise their accounts with references to their lives before the Holocaust and to reflect on what has and has not been salvaged from their past. This is certainly the case for survivors whose testimonies are included in the videotestimony project initiated by the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre (JHMRC) in Melbourne, Australia. While these testimonies provide invaluable evidence of Holocaust experiences, they also act as conduits for memories of a pre- and post-Holocaust world. They become tangible bearers of an intangible heritage. The following discussion of Erica's videotestimony, filmed at the JHMRC in 1993, provides a highly suggestive example of how heritage can be transmitted within the medium of videotestimony.²

Since its establishment in 1987 the primary purpose of the JHMRC videotestimony project has been to capture the memories of survivors in order to document their experiences of suffering during the Holocaust. Importantly the survivor interview does not just focus on the effects of Nazi persecution but covers the whole life story of the subject from birth until the period of the interview. This is because a further objective of the interview is to recuperate what is sometimes referred to as the 'world we have lost' – Jewish life prior to its attempted obliteration – and to explore the extent to which remnants of this life have been rescued by survivors as they re-established themselves in Australia. Interviews reveal how, through assertions of Jewish communal identity and through memory of family, survivors have transposed past communal practices into their current communities. The 'creators' of the JHMRC

videotestimonies clearly understand the role videotestimony can play in preserving 'lost' culture.

Because interviewers assume that their interviewees share and understand the broader agenda of recuperation of Jewish life, this can profoundly shape the interviewing process. Aleida Assmann's distinction between the genre of autobiography and the genre of videotestimony highlights the critical role played by the interaction between interviewer and interviewee:

The video testimony may also have an internal impulse, but this depends on the external call, together with a framework of technical support. It has a less elaborated form that also leaves room for open-ended passages, such as pauses, periods of silence, uncompleted sentences, innuendo. It is dialogic rather than monologic; it depends for its process on the continuous guidance of another person, who asks questions and supplies some response (2006: 265).

Assmann further argues that videotestimonies, when viewed (rather than passively collected), have the potential for intergenerational transmission of experience. The videotestimonies consist of an archive that 'has a double function: to *store* testimonies as virtual information and to *restore* them as communicated and as re-embodied knowledge' (italics in original) (2006: 271). The attempts at and possibilities of restoration are the focus of the following analysis.

A technique used by the JHMRC project to facilitate the restorative function of videotestimonies is to request survivors to bring along physical documents and photographs from their life before the Holocaust, during the Holocaust and their postwar life. Thus, at the conclusion of the interview, conventional 'documentary' evidence is juxtaposed to the apparently more 'subjective' perspective of the personal narrative.³ According to Phillip Maisel, the guiding hand of the testimonial project, the filming of survivors with their personal objects has been an integral feature of the videotestimonies from their inception. Apart from providing physical evidence of 'lost worlds', he believes that allowing interviewees to show their personal photographs 'restores' (Maisel's term) their dignity by reconfirming to them their identities as human beings (Maisel, 2008). Not all interviewees are in a position to display documents. In her videotestimony, however, Erica not only presents a wealth of material, particularly photographs, but her discussion of this material with the interviewer and camera operator challenges many of the current assumptions made by scholars of Holocaust memory that restoration is problematic and that, despite their promise of verisimilitude, photographs conceal rather than reveal stable historical meaning (Baer 2002; Hirsch 2001; Hirsch & Spitzer 2006).

The main interview

In the videotestimony Erica (born in 1929) recounts her childhood spent in a comfortable middle-class home in Vienna from birth until the annexation of Austria in 1938 by the Nazis. She describes the family's subsequent relocation from its apartment to an impoverished area in Vienna where, like other Viennese Jews, her family members eked out an existence. Erica's family was then deported to Theresienstadt (a ghetto for 'privileged' Jews in Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia) in late 1942 as part of the last group of Jews to be deported from Vienna. The family remained so long in Vienna due to the influence of her older brother who worked for the Jewish community. In 1944 first her father and then Erica and her mother were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Erica heard later that her older brother, who was suffering from tuberculosis and was considered unfit for deportation, collapsed and died in Theresienstadt the day he farewelled his family. On arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau Erica's mother was immediately selected for gassing. Erica endured five days in Auschwitz-Birkenau before being transported to work as a forced labourer in a munitions factory near Dresden. Indeed, she 'saw Dresden burning!' Soon after, in early 1945, the slave workers were evacuated and were transported aimlessly around the region for eight weeks, until they were finally dumped at the Mauthausen camp five days before liberation. Erica was the only member of her immediate family to survive, although her father's exact fate was never formally confirmed. After the war, with the realisation that her family had perished, she migrated to Australia where she joined an uncle who was anxious to sponsor her.

While the description of her Holocaust experience undeniably lies at the centre of the videotestimony, much of the videotestimony is occupied by discussion of Erica's prewar memories (amplified at the end of the testimony by a review of her family's prewar photograph album) and of Erica's ideas about the ongoing issue of Jewish identity – a discussion that extends from her earliest childhood to her circumstances at the time of the interview as a doting grandmother living in Australia. Here, the interviewer plays a critical role. Not only does she draw out the specific details of Erica's Holocaust story, but she also invests considerable energy into shaping the interview as she prompts Erica to locate her memories within the wider context of her place within the Jewish community. The interviewer adopts an explicitly 'insider' position *vis-a-vis* the community, assuming that Erica shares her premise that the restoration and preservation of Jewish community life is fundamental to post-Holocaust existence.⁴ The interviewer's notions of family are deeply intertwined with notions of community.

Already in her initial questions referring to the period before the Nazi annexation of Austria, the interviewer asks, 'What was the Jewish life? What sort of Jewish life did you have? Religious?'

Erica responds that she was too young to remember but her mother took her to synagogue every week and the family celebrated the major holidays. The interviewer probes further:

Interviewer: And was it *kosher* in your home?

Erica: No. In Vienna there were very few people ... the Jewish people were assimilated to Vienna.

Interviewer: But did you have a strong Jewish identity?

Erica: Oh yes. Oh definitely.

Erica comments, nonetheless, that her family was not particularly observant, although she remembers that the local public school taught an hour of Hebrew and history a week as part of her religious instruction class, hence this response to further questioning about her memories prior to the Nazi annexation.

Interviewer: Did you belong to any Jewish organisations? Or your parents? Any Zionist organisations?

Erica: Not as far as I know.

Interviewer: But your parents had a Jewish company?

Erica: Most of their friends were Jewish.

Erica appears to resist the direction the interviewer wants to take her by qualifying her answers with the observation that she was too young to remember much. The interviewer concludes her exploration of Erica's memories of her prewar family by asking her to name her aunts and uncles who perished in the Holocaust, 'Tell us their names. You can memorialise them'. Naming the dead is a deeply entrenched Jewish memorial tradition and is clearly understood as such by the interviewer.

As the interviewer moves to Erica's memories of life under Nazi oppression, the themes of Jewish identity and communal life remain an important focal point of questioning. Referring to Erica's life in Vienna prior to her deportation, the interviewer asks, 'How were the Jews organised by the *Jüdische Gemeinde* [Jewish community]?'⁵ Erica notes that, as well as taking on an important welfare role, the *Gemeinde*, 'Tried to keep Jewish things going and that's when the Zionist groups started beginning'. Despite the rise of Zionist influence, Erica comments that during this period her parents continued to feel 'very Austrian'. Once in the Theresienstadt ghetto, Erica came directly under the influence of the Zionist movement. She lived in a girls' barrack run by the Zionists where, with the other children, she learnt Hebrew, which sadly for most turned out to be futile. She comments wryly that they were, 'all preparing to go to Israel which of course never came'.

The interviewer pursues the issue of the maintenance of Jewish practice *in extremis* and asks whether during her incarceration in the munitions' factory near Dresden. Erica observed any religious people 'praying quietly in the corner?' When Erica replies she had not, she is then asked:

Interviewer: And no one knew anything about any *yom tovim* [Jewish high holidays]?

Erica: We kept *Yom Kippur* [the Day of Atonement when Jews are expected to fast]. We kept our rations the night before.

Storing rations enabled the Jewish workers to save food to use to break the fast, although Erica comments that without *matzo* [unleavened bread] they could not observe the Passover.

Erica's orientation towards religion is revealed to be of a far less formal nature than that of the interviewer's. Erica's most extensive account of her religious beliefs in the videotestimony is triggered by a query about her ongoing feelings about the loss of her parents and brother and is not a response to a direct question about her connection to Jewish tradition. Erica observes that she has put the past behind her and has had to be tough in the face of other setbacks, including the early death of her husband. She explains her ability to cope with adversity as follows, 'And I somehow got a gift which God gave me. I believe very strongly in God. That is what kept me alive and still does today. I'm not religious. I'm not *frum* [observant]. My belief in God is so strong and that's what kept me alive and

I'm positive about this'. Erica's faith is underpinned by her experience in Auschwitz-Birkenau where she believes that praying to God saved her from dying of exposure after she was drenched by rain and spent the night in inadequate clothing and without a blanket.

Erica: I think my belief in God kept me alive.

Interviewer: So you always had hope?

Erica: Yes

Interviewer: You always believed that God will ...?

Erica: Yes.

Interviewer: So that brings me to my question. If you had that strong belief in God how can we explain – how can a God-believing Jew explain – how the Jews perished?

Erica: In all the camps people used to say there is no God but my mother brought me up to believe there is a God and it stuck. Every night I say my prayers but I'm not a religious person.

The interviewer's reference point remains communal, whereas Erica's orientation is far more private and this tension is further apparent in the last section of the interview.

Here Erica considers the issue of her children's Jewish identity and sets the scene for subsequent discussion of family photographs. The conversation follows directly from Erica's assertion of personal belief:

Interviewer: So besides being a strong believer your identity as a Jew is very strong?

Erica: Is very strong, is very strong.

Interviewer: And how do you see the importance of Israel that came into being after the war?

Erica: It's very important for the Jewish people to have a land of their own. It will help definitely.

After further discussion in which Erica admits she has never visited Israel because she is frightened of the risk of being caught up in conflict, the focus of the interview shifts to Erica's children's religious identification:

Interviewer: And your children, do they have a very strong Jewish identity?

Erica: A very strong Jewish identity. Particularly my daughter. She's got two kids. My two sons married out but it doesn't worry me because they're happy and the girls are good. So long as they know that they're Jewish and the kids come to *Pesach* [Passover]. I keep *Pesach*.

Interviewer: The children have been brought up Jewish?

Erica: The children have been brought up without religion at the moment. What will happen later I don't worry about tomorrow. I don't like to think back too much. I don't like to think forwards. As long as I see my kids happy. They are all good kids.

Interviewer: So that's another question. Do you think that's the way to go? For Jews to become part of the majority population?

Erica: No.

Interviewer: To blend in?

Erica: I wouldn't like to say that at all. I would have preferred them to have Jewish. But they're lovely girls. They make my boys happy. Who am I tell them what to do?

The interviewer indicates agreement, although with a somewhat begrudging sigh. As will be seen below, however, her reservations are quickly assuaged when she 'meets' Erica's family in her photograph album.

Viewing photographs

At the conclusion of the 'formal' part of the interview, Erica is given the opportunity to display to the camera physical evidence relating to her life history and to discuss its significance. In most JHMRC videotestimonies this segment constitutes a brief coda to the main videotestimony, but significantly in Erica's case the display takes up a quarter of the eighty minute interview. As Maisel had envisaged, the sharing of pre-Holocaust photographs represents an important opportunity for Erica to re-establish her identity as an individual untouched by the Holocaust. Beyond individual restoration, what also emerges is a broader restoration based on building intergenerational connections that stretch from before the Holocaust to the present – a process mediated within the videotestimony by the participants in the discussion of the photographs and, without, by the relationship established between the videotestimony itself and its current viewers. Through the medium of videotestimony, the tangible photograph album is quite self-consciously incorporated into the intangible heritage of the Australian-Jewish community.

As Erica presents her material, the camera, operated by Maisel, is no longer focused on her face (as it had been during the formal interview) but is directed towards individual documents or photographs placed on a table. Erica's hand (or that of the interviewer) points to specific features whose significance need amplification and, under Maisel's guidance, reposition material to facilitate filming. Erica's voice and that of her interviewer are joined on the soundtrack by those of two males. The main male voice we hear is that of Maisel who, from behind the camera, both frames the filming of the objects on the table and actively participates in the general discussion about them. The other male who makes very occasional comments remains unidentified.

Before moving to the photographs, Erica briefly presents a series of documents (mostly original) that trace her and her family's fate under persecution. These include her father's *Heimatschein* that documented his Austrian nationality. This document was a pre-requisite for his application for the passport he required for an ill-fated attempt to emigrate to the United States. Next comes a document indicating that her brother had not returned from Theresienstadt. An identity card, issued on Erica's return to Vienna, confirms her imprisonment in Auschwitz-Birkenau and Mauthausen. Her discharge paper from Mauthausen similarly provides stark proof of her suffering. Finally, we are shown a couple of identity documents dating from Erica's postwar return to Vienna.

In contrast to the relative paucity of Erica's documents relating specifically to the Holocaust period, Erica's prewar family photograph album represents, in Erica's words, 'my treasure'. In anticipation of migration to the United States, Erica's parents had shipped off the family's valuables, including their photograph albums, to their American relatives. Unfortunately, Erica's family was unable to escape, but, unlike many survivors, Erica retains a physical legacy of her family that genuinely functions as a testamentary object (Simon 2006; Simon et al. 2005). Indeed, Erica describes how most of her parents' other possessions were dispersed without her receiving them:

Erica: The photos is my treasure. In fact I'm unlucky there too because when I came out and got in touch with them too I was told sorry we had to sell a lot of stuff. We thought you were all dead. We couldn't keep it any more and they sent me a few bits of jewellery and the photos which I cherish and the case that's a hundred years old.

Interviewer: I think that's most important.

Erica: To me that is very, very important and my kids cherish it too.

And it is no wonder that Erica cherishes the album.

Placed on the table is a beautiful example of a prewar, old-fashioned photograph album. Sepia-coloured photographs with serrated white borders are carefully laid out on a dark background, several to a page. Next to each photograph is a meticulously hand-written German label in Gothic script. Tissue paper separates the pages. Most of the photographs relate to holidays and show Erica as a young child, her parents and her brother. As Erica moves through the earliest photographs, pointing out family members, she stops at a photograph of an eighteen-month old girl. Maisel's voice interjects, 'Who's that sweet little girl?' Erica responds with obvious pleasure, 'That is me!!!' And a moment later Maisel reiterates, 'Isn't she beautiful?', with the interviewer echoing, 'Beautiful!' In the context of an interview relating to the most extreme of disruptions, the Holocaust, this type of exchange allows Erica to confirm that her identity was not always that of Holocaust survivor.



Figure 1 Erica as a child.

Whereas Maisel's observations project Erica directly back into her past, the interviewer presents alternative interpretive possibilities. Commenting on a series of family photographs of Erica's third birthday, the interviewer imagines that the images were the product of a conscious act of preservation for the future, exclaiming, 'Your parents are living through their children isn't it? That's their immortality ...'

In contrast to Maisel the interviewer is far more oriented towards the group, both the family and the community, than the individual. As discussion moves to photographs depicting holidays Erica spent in 1937 with her father's family in Czechoslovakia, Erica has difficulty deciphering the labels that provide the tenuous links to long-forgotten details of her family history, prompting Erica to ask, 'Where are my glasses?' To which the interviewer responds:

Interviewer: Will these glasses help?

Erica: I've got them. They are so small, the photos.

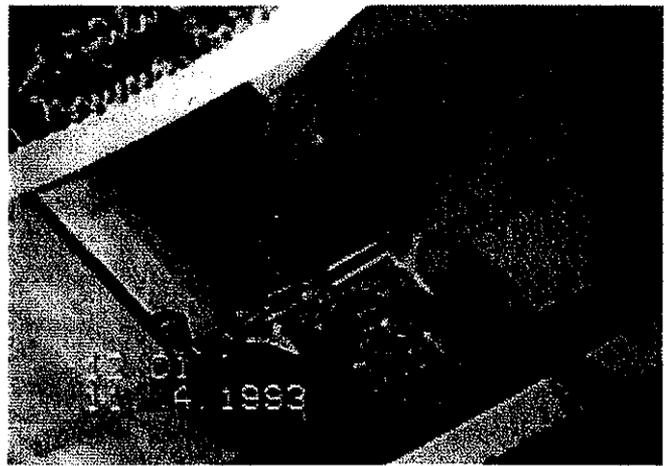


Figure 2 Pointing to the spectral figure of the rabbi.

This episode neatly encapsulates the differing perspectives of interviewer and interviewee and even attempts by the interviewer to encourage Erica to see events through her eyes. Whereas Erica picks up on the personal significance of photographs, singling out a photograph of herself and her mother with the comment, 'This is my favourite photo please', the interviewer, as in the earlier part of the interview, focuses on the communal. She is interested in Erica's response to a series of group photographs of people (most of whom Erica cannot recognise), a photograph of a rabbi and of a synagogue. This prompts the following exchange:

Erica: Here, my auntie was a housekeeper to the rabbi.

Interviewer: Do you remember the name of the synagogue?

And Erica continues later on.

Erica: That's my brother, my mother and myself and that was my auntie. The rabbi is looking through the window.



Figure 3 Passing over the interviewer's glasses.

At this moment private and communal perspectives intersect in a way that reinforces Nancy Miller's perceptive comment that the 'memory work' of photographs involves a 'process of scrutinizing the photograph to document a past that is at once personal and collective' (1999: 52). Erica's photographs, however, do more than point to the past. As the videotestimony draws to a conclusion, photographs increasingly become a medium for linking the past to the future.

Thus, when Erica apologises because one of the photographs is curling at the edges with the comment that, 'The kids keep pinching photos and taking them out', she is describing how

photographs, by their very nature as objects to be touched, handled and not just observed, physically and literally cross generations.⁶ Indeed, slipped into the back of the album, together with another loose photograph dating from before the first world war, is a colour photograph of one of Erica's sons in a sporting uniform. Erica exclaims in delight, 'That is my youngest son when he played for Ajax!' (a Jewish sporting club). This colour photograph appears to be a refugee from the second album Erica displays. Containing photographs of Erica's children and their spouses, her grandchildren and partner, the more recent album eschews the formal order of the first. Sepia is replaced by bright (even garish) colours, tissue paper by plastic and there are no captions to restrain the photographs into a fixed chronology. Here too, however, a photograph appears out of place. Located next to a colour photograph of a woman and a young man is a childhood photograph of Erica, her parents and her brother. Referring to the juxtaposed photographs Erica comments:

Erica: That's a mixture now. That is what I really love ... That is my daughter Judy and her son Jesse.

Interviewer [comparing the two photographs]: I can see right back to you.



Figure 1 Erica as a child.

Transcending time and space, the photographs offer a continuing source of discussion for the interviewer and Maisel, as they comment on family resemblances spanning four generations. Seamlessly, despite the catastrophe of the Holocaust, the family appears to have been preserved.

Not only do the photographs suggest family continuity, they also seem to confirm for the interviewer the possibility of communal preservation. Through most of the videotestimony, there appears to be a tension between the interviewer's commitment to Jewish community life and Erica's more flexible approach. This tension, however, immediately dissolves with the opening of the second album. As she looks at the photograph of Erica's eldest son, the interviewer exclaims:

Interviewer: Are you Mark G's mother? I can't believe this?

Erica: Yes.

Interviewer: He's a good friend of my brother Joe F.

Erica: I know Joe so well. Joe and Michelle.

Interviewer: You're joking ... That is funny ... And *Mazel Tov* [congratulations] on the new baby!!!

After this exchange the tone between Erica and the interviewer changes radically. Erica is far more relaxed and animated and based on her personal connection with Erica's family the interviewer now recognises Erica's place within the Melbourne Jewish community. Indeed, the conclusion of the videotestimony cements the connection between Erica and the interviewer with these final observations:

Erica: This is my other daughter-in-law Eve with Nicola when she was a baby.

Interviewer: I know Nicola. I see her at all my nephews' and nieces' birthday parties.

Restoring the intangible

The above discussion of photographs, historical and current, attests to the possibility of forging a link between the community destroyed by the Holocaust and the post-Holocaust community – a link that some theorists have suggested is illusory. When interpreting photographs of Jewish life prior to the Holocaust, images of Holocaust events themselves or even of surviving fragments of Jewish communities in Europe, such theorists emphasise trauma, loss and absence. Referring to the 'spectral' images associated with a traumatic past, Ulrich Baer argues that they must remain forever unassimilable into the present, because 'trauma seems to result from the mind's inability to edit and place an event within a coherent mental, textual, or historical context in ways that would allow it to become part of lived experience and subsequent memory' (2002: 10). Similarly, Marianne Hirsch, through her notion of postmemory – the (re)remembering by the second generation of their parents' experiences often through artefacts such as photographs – challenges the possibility of establishing meaningful connections between the past and the present in the face of unimaginable trauma. For Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, her collaborator on a research project exploring Hirsch's relationship to her survivor parents' home city of Czernowitz, 'The work of postmemorial reading entails juxtaposing two incommensurable temporalities, exposing and keeping open the disjunction between them' (2006: 246). Based on their personal experience of misreading what seemed familiar about Hirsch's family's past, they argue postmemory risks papering over the trauma and rupture inherent in Holocaust memory.

Insofar as Erica's pre-Holocaust album incorporates photographs of family members who were murdered within ten years of being photographed, it too can be interpreted as a deeply traumatic artefact of loss. The context of Erica's videotestimony, not to mention the restorative rationale of the JHMRC videotestimony project, suggest an alternative possibility, not as intellectually sophisticated as that developed by Baer and Hirsch and Spitzer, and maybe naïve, but, nonetheless, one that needs to be taken seriously. This is because faith in recuperation comes from survivors themselves who believe that, in response to loss, cultural continuity and transmission are not only possible, but are a cultural imperative. Coincidentally, a temporary exhibition recently held at the Jewish Museum of Vienna made a similar point. Entitled *Leben! [To Life!]*, the exhibit consists of an installation of 2000 photographs documenting the revival of Jewish life in Vienna after the war. From 1956 the photographer, Margit Dobronyi, a Jewish refugee from Hungary, documented countless *Bar Mitzvahs*, weddings and community events and, as the website indicates, a selection

from these photographs 'tell of the need to make up for missed opportunities; of the desire, despite everything to sing and to dance' (my translation) (Leben!: 2008). Suspended from the ceiling, vibrant images (mostly in colour) of smiling children and joyful parents, are juxtaposed to the ethereal holograms used to portray Viennese-Jewish history in the Museum's controversial permanent exhibition (Offe and Fliedl: 2004). The effect is remarkably similar to that achieved when photographs from Erica's two albums are placed next to each other, the rupture caused by the Holocaust appears to be bridged and bridgeable.

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Endnotes

- 1 Research for this article was facilitated by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant (2003-5) with the JHMRC for the project 'Analysing Testimonies of Jewish Holocaust Survivors' with Michele Langfield, Pam Maclean and Peter Monteath as chief investigators.
- 2 All subsequent references to Erica's videotestimony come from Erica (1993).
- 3 In the case of one of the interviews, the respondent, a trained curator, who is quite suspicious of the historical value of oral history, interpolates documents into the interview to provide external validation for her account, Saba (1993).
- 4 For a comprehensive discussion of the role of the interviewer in JHMRC videotestimonies see Langfield & Maclean (2009).
- 5 The Nazi regime charged Jewish organisations with the responsibility for the day-to-day running of the Jewish community
- 6 For the role physical objects play in triggering 'sensory memories' see Langfield & Maclean (2002).