

# Campscapes in and through testimonies: New approaches to researching and representing oral history interviews in memorial museums<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the role of audio and visual testimonies in safeguarding, understanding, presenting, validating and decentering the history and memory campscapes, be it, for researchers, practitioners, memory activists, or museum visitors. Its primary objective is to present and contextualize two research tools developed within the framework of the project *Accessing Campscapes: Strategies for Using European Conflicted Heritage*: the Campscapes Testimony Catalogue, a new directory of oral history interviews devoted to selected camps covered within the scope of the project; and the online environment Remembering Westerbork: Learning with Interviews – a prototype of an online display environment presenting survivors’ experiences to today’s visitors in an exemplary memorial that opens up, expands and complexifies the paradigmatic narrative offered by the campscape at the on-site exhibition.

## Key Words

oral history, video testimonies, campscapes, museums

## Introduction

In the digital age, audio and audiovisual testimonies are not only important sources for historical research on various instances of political violence, but also integral to the visitor experience in contemporary memorial museums (Williams 2007). Often, when featuring in the exhibition displays, they are perceived “as a key aspect of the museum’s pedagogic function” (Cooke and Frieze 2017: 75; de Jong 2018). Facilitating affective attentiveness and empathy towards victims and deeper, personalized insight into the events, they play crucial roles for both the reception of museum narratives and for dominant constructions of the past validated by the

‘authority’ of experience (Scott 1991; Michaelis 2011) and, in the case of on-site museums, the ‘authenticity’ of place. By choosing to represent manifold and complex histories through specific individual testimonies and individual narrations, curators have a major influence on those aspects of history that are highlighted and which are, in turn, backgrounded or foreclosed. Yet, oral history interviews, precisely because of their idiosyncratic and personal character (although always positioned and culturally framed), can also support differentiated understandings of memories of conflict in the twentieth century. In fact, some would argue that “the inclusion of personal stories results in the democratization of the museum spaces, through decentering

<sup>1</sup> The research leading to this paper was conducted within the HERA Uses of the Past project *Accessing Campscapes. Inclusive Strategies for Using European Conflicted Heritage* (2016–2019), led by Rob van der Laarse, (<https://www.campscapes.org/>). The project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No 649307. The paper was further researched and written within the framework of the project *Globalized Memorial Museums*, which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (GMM—grant agreement No 816784). We would like to thank Kobi Kabalek, Daniel Schuch and Ljiljana Radonić for their thorough readings and helpful comments.

of the museum's authority" (Cooke and Frieze 2017: 77) – similar to the way in which it has transformed the practices of history writing decentring the authoritative voice of a historian based on documentary archival sources, mostly those created by the perpetrators (Bloxham and Kushner 2004; Wieviorka 2006: 56–95). Providing accounts of previously uncharted local and microhistories, and multi-perspectival representations of victimhood, agency, or responsibility, personal testimonies open new spaces for reflection and narrative experimentation.

In this paper, we dwell on the possibilities created by this tension between authoritative museal and political narratives about the past and the transformative potential of the (always selectively used) personal accounts of victims, focusing on several European campscapes. Based on research carried out at the Freie Universität Berlin (FUB) within the framework of the HERA-funded project *Accessing Campscapes: Inclusive Strategies for Using European Conflicted Heritage*, this paper offers a glimpse into a systematic analysis of the ways in which audio and video survivors' testimonies are being employed in historical research, memory studies, private and public institutions, complemented by the critical examination of the historical, social and political contexts of their collection, archiving, research and display. Exploring the complex political, cultural and material dynamics of former concentration, extermination and forced labor camps in Europe, both as a means of (genocidal) violence and locations of collective remembrance, knowledge production and musealization, we inquire into the specific roles of personal testimonies within the conflicting interpretations and the contested narratives of these campscapes.

This paper discusses the role of audio and visual testimonies in safeguarding, understanding, presenting, validating and decentring the history and memory campscapes, be it, for researchers, practitioners, memory activists, or museum visitors. But its primary objective is to present and contextualize two research tools developed within the framework of the project: the *Campscapes Testimony Catalogue*, a new directory of oral history interviews devoted to selected camps covered within the scope of the project; and the online environment *Remembering Westerbork: Learning with Interviews* – a prototype of an online display environment presenting survivors' experiences to today's visitors in an exemplary memorial that opens up, expands and complexifies the paradigmatic narrative offered by the campscape at the on-site exhibition.

## Testimonies in oral history

Unlike the disciplinary fields of anthropology or sociology, which traditionally work with information retrieved from direct and indirect witnesses of events, much historical research has long discarded personal testimonies as unreliable, both due to temporal distance between

analyzed events and narration, and to the inherent subjectivity, fragmentarity and malleability of memory of those who could testify to them – and resorted, instead, to documentary sources because of their ostensible and, nowadays, contested 'objectivity' (Thompson 2000; Bloxham and Kushner 2004). This disciplinary orthodoxy began to shift in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, especially with the growing attention to Social History. In the wake of the Second World War, various scholars began to incorporate oral and written accounts of survivors and witnesses to historical events, both mundane and exceptional, such as political violence and war. The first Oral History Research Office was created in 1948 by Allan Nevins at Columbia University. While in his practice Nevins turned to influential intellectual and political figures, by the 1960s oral history interviews were increasingly often conducted also with a much more diversified group of social actors, leading to the development of an interdisciplinary field of oral history (Thompson 2000; Sheftel and Zembrzycki 2013; Boyd and Larson 2014). Based on an exchange of expertise between history, sociology, anthropology, literary studies and culture studies, it facilitated new, critical methodologies of conducting, collecting, validating and interpreting interviews. Nowadays, interviews are considered an extremely useful resource for multidisciplinary research in many fields within the social sciences and humanities.

Among the main impulses behind the growth of the field, and its many and varied methodologies – such as the development of new technologies allowing us to record and store oral testimonies (Pagenstecher 2018), and the shrinking time span between historical research and the events it scrutinizes – was the emancipatory and political potential of bottom up accounts, their ability to challenge dominant narratives of the past (and present). This was, for instance, the main rationale behind the research practice of Marxist historiography in the United Kingdom already in the 1940s and 1950s, carried out by the Communist Party Historians Group, gathering historians such as Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill or Rodney Hilton (Schwarz 1982), and by cultural studies scholars working in the 1970s and 1980s in the Popular Memory Group at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (Popular Memory Group 1982). In both cases, history writing was constructed as a critical practice orientated towards two basic principles – the need to expose the ideological underpinnings of traditional, national(ist) historiography, and to re-evaluate and foreground vernacular memories and bottom up experiences and perspectives of categories of subjects usually excluded from historical narratives: minorities, members of the working class, women, and queer people. Constantly revisited and improved, this outlook on oral history still informs a large section of research carried out in the Anglo-Saxon world, in Latin America and other places (Sarkar and Walker 2010; High 2015; Carey 2017).<sup>2</sup>

2 Constrained by the economy of the text and the thematic focus of the issue on the European campscapes dating back to the Second World War in Europe, we will not address in this paper the large corpus of personal eyewitness accounts created, for instance, by human rights activism around the world or by the many and varied Truth and Reconciliation Commissions.

In German-speaking academia and beyond, mostly as a sub-discipline of historiography, oral history developed since the late 1970s as a qualitative-hermeneutical approach inspired by qualitative social research (Niethammer 1995; Rosenthal 1995; Wierling 2003), in opposition to the structural and quantifying paradigm of social history dominant at the time. Case studies based on small groups of individual interviews looked for aspects of cultural meaning, dominant tropes and narrative structures, and for intimate accounts and personal agency in the narratives, often focusing on underrepresented groups like women, migrants, or victims of racial and political persecution (Portelli 2003; Andresen et al. 2015; Leh 2015). Of unquestionable importance in this context has been research devoted to National Socialism and the Holocaust, which effectuated a crucial shift in the epistemic and epistemological position of the witness testimony. Its revalorization as a valuable and ethically potent historical source, underway in public and political consciousness since the 1961 Eichmann Trial, the release of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), the establishment of major oral history collections (more on this later on), or the 2000 debate about forced labor compensation (2000) – which were widely received in media, culture and politics (Wieviorka 2006; Sabrow and Frei 2012) – finally found its way also into academia both in history departments and into the by now well-established field of memory studies.

Since the 1970s, life-story interviews have become central in research about the Second World War and the Holocaust (Langer 1991; Hartman 2006), Nazi forced labor (Plato et al. 2010), but also about other instances of political violence (Obertreis and Stephan 2009; Gheith and Jolluck 2010; Dimou et al. 2014). While written historical documents about deportation, exploitation, and extermination often either reflect the perpetrators' perspective or are missing altogether – and by no means exhaust the complexity of the events – survivors' accounts convey the victims' manifold *Erfahrungsgeschichte* [experiential history] (Broda 2004; Niethammer and Leh 2007), and form the basis for a comprehensive, dialogical, integrated history of the Holocaust and the camps (Kabalek 2021).<sup>3</sup> But they also offer insights into the ways in which variously positioned subjects experienced and handled historical events and structures, allowing for a deeper understanding of the aftermath of atrocities in individual biographies and post-war societies (Young 1988).

The acknowledgment of the dynamic but inescapable exchange between personal and biographical memories and collective constructions of the past made it critically important “to examine the historical agency in these eye-witnesses' narratives [...], making historical inquiry the combined study of both what happened and how it is passed down to us” (Young 1997: 56; Eusterschulte,

Knopp and Schulze 2016). Some focus in oral history and associated fields is placed, therefore, on the cultural frames of the personal accounts both constraining and enabling them, on cultural frameworks that offer them scripts and give form to them, on the performative dimension of the audiovisual testimonies, and on the ways in which they enter and transform the public realm feeding into, fostering or challenging institutionalized patterns of commemoration (Passerini 2009). This, again, reinstated a central position to the question about the tension – at times productive, at times violent and exclusionary – between the dominant narratives of the past and personal accounts and testimonies. In the processes of knowledge production by public and private institutions, in shared memories and public discourses of the past, and in museums established at the former camps (and the historical narratives they construct, foster and perpetuate), certain experiences and narratives will be rendered audible, while others will remain inaudible or marginalized and silenced – silencing, too, the tensions and contestations around the campscapes. But, again, the sheer presence, retrievability and/or re-emergence of the oral history accounts will remain invested with the ability to unsettle, expand and complexify.

## The dynamics and politics of collecting

Nowadays, the corpus of audiovisual testimonies of Holocaust survivors and other victims of the mass violence in the Second World War is primarily associated with extensive collections housed by the Yad Vashem memorial, in Israel, which started accumulating survivors' accounts as soon as the 1950s (Cohen 2008), but also, or maybe first and foremost, with major online interview portals created and constantly developed since the late 1970s and the 1990s in the US such as the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies and the Visual History Archive of the USC Shoah Foundation (Apostolopoulos and Pagenstecher 2013; Keilbach 2013; Bothe 2019). The former, created in 1979, institutionalized in 1981 as a part of the Yale University Library, and in 1982 made available to researchers, educators, memory makers and the general public, hosts more than 4,400 testimonies of social actors with various wartime experiences – both with survivors of the Holocaust and with members of local non-Jewish populations, resistance fighters, and liberators (Hartman 1995). The collection of the Visual History Archive, created in the 1990s, contains more than 55,000 video interviews with survivors of the Holocaust and other genocides and instances of political violence. The establishment of these online interview portals – and many others of a similar nature – established video testimony as

<sup>3</sup> With this focus on subjective experiences, individual memories, biographical meaning, and cultural context, oral historians usually have analyzed individual interviews, often conducted by themselves. Rarely, however, have they embarked on larger, comparative studies. For important exceptions, see Browning (2010), Plato et al. (2010), Thonfeld (2014). On the analysis of how the exclusion of testimonies of certain categories of subjects – in this case precisely the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and its aftermath in Poland – can foster nationalist history writing and memory, see Gross (2001), Tokarska-Bakir (2018), Janicka and Żukowski (2019).

a genre in itself, based as they are in an urgency to capture the immediate, personal experience of the survivors of the Holocaust (Hartman 2006; Hogervorst 2019; Greenspan et al. 2021; Schuch 2021: 228–256). This has been extended further by digital interview collections *Forced Labor 1939–1945* and *Memories of the Occupation in Greece*, housed at Freie Universität Berlin, the British-Jewish collection *Refugee Voices*, or Dutch *Eyewitness Stories*, and many others (Bothe 2012; Hogervorst 2020).<sup>4</sup>

By now, there is an extensive corpus of academic literature on the poetics and politics of audiovideo interviews and their transformative dynamics. The interviews collected in the 1950s by Yad Vashem were considered mainly as a means of acquiring missing historical evidence, the interviewers being seen to “privilege number over quality” (Bloxham and Kushner: 36–37); the interviews conducted since the 1970s in the US, however, with an orientation towards the complex life stories of survivors, have been characterized by an often highly emotionally charged exchange between the interviewed and the interviewer, riddled with incoherencies, silences, sighs, outbursts of laughter or tears (Langer 1991; Hartman 1996; Greenspan 2014). With time, many interviews become more coherent, structured and professionalized, based on the repeated experience of providing the account in multiple settings – at public ceremonies, in museums, at campscapes, in schools, and for other digital archives – and in response to the political positionality of the interviewees, the expectations of the listeners and the genre of video testimony itself (Greenspan 2010; Schuch 2022).

But they changed also in response to shifting cultural and political sensitivities, and the attentiveness of both the interviewers and the audiences to previously excluded or taboo topics around war and camps experience such as class, gender-based violence, and, finally, homophobia (Ostrowska 2018, 2021; Hájková 2020, 2021). The extent to which the dominant cultural and epistemological frames continue to instil invisibilities and silences in audiovisual archives of the camps is shown in Kobi Kabalek’s contribution to this issue: examining the accounts of cannibalism in the testimonies of camp survivors, he critically investigates the affective and representational politics behind their muting in oral history and historical research (Kabalek 2023). In short, the uneven distribution of audibility and inaudibility is, more often than not, inherent to the very process of interviewing and differs across institutions that carry out or commission it. But it is, too, further perpetuated by the positioned, selective, often exclusionary, politics of collecting, preservation, research and (selection for) display of recorded personal testimonies.

It is against this background that, within the framework of *Accessing Campscapes*, we investigated the diachronic and synchronic dynamics of audiovisual

testimonies revolving and evolving around the former camps the project comprehensively analysed. These included the extermination camp at Treblinka (Poland), the refugee and transit camp Westerbork (the Netherlands), the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen (Germany), the prison camp at Falstad (Norway), the Ustaša camp at Jasenovac (Croatia), the Roma camp in Lety (Czech Republic), and the prison camp Jachymov operational in the early post-war years in state socialist Czechoslovakia. All camps were considered in the project through the prism of the dense memory politics around them but also through their institutional transformations, dating back either to the pre-war period when they fulfilled different functions – as, for instance, a refugee camp (Westerbork) or a school for ‘delinquent’ youth (Falstad) – or to the post-war years, before the camps were transformed into memorial sites and served, amongst others, as a DP camp, a refugee camp, and military barracks (Bergen-Belsen), punishment camps for Nazi collaborators (Westerbork and Falstad), refugee settlement for (formerly) colonial subjects (Westerbork), or an industrial pig farm (Lety). The articulations of those phases and transformations in audio and audiovisual testimonies also found their way into the project.<sup>5</sup>

In our research, we expanded the synchronic frame beyond both the establishment and institutionalization of oral history as a scholarly discipline, especially in relation to the Holocaust, the Second World War, and other instances of political violence covered by the project, and the institutionalization of major online interview portals mentioned above. This was in line with the recently acknowledged necessity to reconfigure the history of collecting and to consider the earlier, often dispersed and localized, practices of gathering survivor accounts either in written or in oral form – that unsettle the notion that the voices of survivors were completely silenced or ignored in the post-war period (Cesarani and Sundquist 2012; Gallas and Jockusch 2020). Amongst those most prominent figure the extensive archives of the Jewish Historical Institute, which had already started gathering accounts from Jewish survivors of the Holocaust in 1944 (Jockusch 2012; Beer et al. 2014; Aleksium 2020; Jockusch 2022), or the long forgotten collection, rediscovered in the 1990s, of audio recordings of survivors conducted in 1946 by David P. Boder with the victims of Nazi prosecution in DPs Camps (Niewyk 1998; Rosen 2010; Schuch 2020). It was these collections that, for some survivors, offered the first opportunity to narrate their experiences, that constituted the first attempts at making testimonies historically, ethically and politically expressive, and formed an important prehistory to later audiovisual collections, bringing to the forefront the need to always historically and geographically situate interview practices

4 To access the interview collections, visit: Fortunoff Archive, <https://fortunoff.library.yale.edu/>, Visual History Archive <https://sfi.usc.edu/vha/access> Interview, *Archive Forced Labor 1939–1945*, <http://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de/en>, *Memories of the Occupation in Greece*, <http://www.occupation-memories.org/en>, *Refugee Voices*, <https://www.ajrrefugeevoices.org.uk/refugee-voices>.

5 While in the paper we will not address all camps and their dense histories, they are reflected in many contributions in this issue.

and the politics behind them (including the availability of recording technologies at a given time). But even more central for us was the synchronic decentralization of the main collections pertaining to the camps we investigated. Our aim was to account for the multitude of temporally and geographically dispersed, and variously politically positioned actors, institutions and projects engaged in gathering audiovisual accounts, and, whenever possible, their comparative analysis.

### *Campscares testimony catalogue*

This was facilitated by the creation of the *Campscares Testimonies Catalogue*, an online database of metadata of testimonies pertaining to the camps researched in the project.<sup>6</sup> It was envisioned as a cross-collection catalogue of audio- or video-recorded testimonies from major digital archives, museums established at the former camps, and smaller online projects. The *Catalogue* was developed at the Centre for Digital Systems (CeDiS) of the Freie Universität Berlin. The location of the *Catalogue* at the Department for Digital Interview Collections provided us with access to several collections, which the Centre hosts and to which it serves as the full-access site: the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, the archive *Forced Labour 1939–1945*, the Fortunoff Video Archive and the British *Refugee Voices* (Pagenstecher 2018). These digital research environments are accessible online, and are provisioned with a time-coded alignment of transcriptions, media files, and metadata, and allow for thematically focused searches and annotations throughout the audio- or video-recordings. In the *Campscares Testimonies Catalogue* we linked those otherwise separate collections through a meta-catalogue. Then we began to successively add data from other collections – some were obtained from the institutions’ websites, others were requested and shared with us by archivists or curators, manually processed and absorbed into the catalogue.

At this point, the *Catalogue* enables tracing of more than 7700 audio and video interviews available at 23 institutions worldwide. Using various filters, the user can search through metadata of the interviews, access the interview online (with or without registration) or, as is often the case, learn that the recording can be watched exclusively at the site. Thus, it is possible to explore the frequency with which some survivors gave their testimony in one or across collections, when and how specific projects interviewed different survivor groups and other actors at different times, and how, in fact, many of

the archives and digital collections are still inaccessible. Sadly, this was one of the most important and most research-constraining discoveries of the project.

What the *Catalogue* and the research leading to it offers is, indeed, a highly decentralized view on audiovisual collections pertaining to the researched campscares, many of them created by and housed at the museums established at the former campscares and accessible only during on-site (archival) visits for authorized audiences, and often conspicuously under-researched.<sup>7</sup> Those collections, created after museums were established, were often instrumental towards the development of new exhibitions or museums acquiring an educational or research function. This was the case, for instance, in Bergen-Belsen – a large scale interview project was launched at the memorial before the opening of the new permanent exhibition in 2007. Today it hosts a collection of more than 600 interviews, the metadata of which could, nevertheless, not be included in the *Campscares Testimonies Catalogue* due to privacy concerns. Owing to the close cooperation with memorials acting as associated partners in the project, the *Catalogue* lists, amongst others, 495 interviews from the archive of the Camp Westerbork Memorial Center, 162 recorded at the Falstad Center and Museum, and 90 conducted and stored at the Jasenovac Memorial Site. Many of those interviews are, however, still insufficiently catalogued, lacking metadata, transcripts or translations.

Yet, some recordings could not be included in the *Catalogue* not so much because of administrative and/or juridical constraints but due to ongoing political controversies surrounding the camp, its wartime history and post-war memory, as was the case with Jasenovac – described in detail in Vjeran Pavlaković’s and Andriana Benčić Kužnar’s (2023) contribution to this issue. Although in possession of video recorded testimonies and, at first, willing to share the data for the catalogue, the staff of the Donja Gradina Memorial in Republika Srpska cut out contact with our team. Most probably this memorial site – situated on the opposite side of the Sava River from Jasenovac, right at the border between Bosnia and Croatia, and a location of mass graves of the victims of the camp – had to avoid being seen as cooperating too closely with the staff of Jasenovac Memorial Site, which was an associate partner in the project. But even setting aside this fascinating, if not symptomatic, politics of (in)accessibility, Jasenovac offers a compelling case study for the analysis of the dynamics and politics of collecting surrounding the former camps. Also, in this case, the gathering of testimonies of its survivors started already during the war.<sup>8</sup> They were collected, first, by the commission established

6 Campscapes Testimonies Catalogue, <http://testimonies.campscares.org/en>, was compiled between 2017 and 2019 as part of the Accessing Campscapes project by Verena Buser, Zuzanna Dziuban, Cord Pagenstecher and Niels Pohl, with support from Boris Behnen and Šárka Jarská, using software developed by Rico Simke and Christian Gregor.

7 As an important exception one can quote the Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project, which resulted in a series of analytical academic publications: Botz et al. (2021), Prenninger et al. (2021).

8 The Research on Jasenovac testimonies was carried out within *Accessing Campscapes* with the support of Boris Behnen. The following draws from the results presented in his unpublished manuscript (Behnen, unpublished manuscript).

by the Antifascist Council of People's Liberation of Yugoslavia and, after the war, by associations of resistance fighters. These testimonies formed, in fact, the basis for the fractographical knowledge about the camp but also for the dominant narrative of "Brotherhood and Unity", which effectively blurred ethnic distinctions between the major victim groups – Serbs, Jews and Roma (Pavlaković and Benčić Kužnar 2023). This changed decisively in the 1980s when various ethnic groups reclaimed the memory of the camp while, at the same time, its history became the subject of revisionist claims.

It was also in the 1980s and the 1990s that Jasenovac survivors were approached by major oral history institutions such as the Fortunoff Archive, USHMM and Shoah Foundation, with the help of local interviewers. The Fortunoff Archive and the USHMM are in possession of more than 100 recordings, whereas the Shoah Foundation has around 350. The specificity of the interviews conducted in the 1980s in Yugoslavia vis-à-vis those recorded in survivors living in the US was analyzed in detail by Jovan Byford (2014). Unlike the deeply personalized and intimate life stories described above, the personal accounts from (former) Yugoslavia centered heavily on factual reconstruction, validation of 'truth claims', and articulation of collectivized identities, reflecting the local take on wartime history, on the traditions of interviewing not yet shaped by the advent of the 'era of the witness' but, too, testifying to the political crisis looming large over the region. What this testifies to, moreover, is the fact that the very form and content of the recorded narratives is always a result of a directed and highly politicized practice of interviewing, however transparent it frames itself to be.

There are, nevertheless, also more recent and still largely under-researched oral history projects pertaining to Jasenovac that we came across while researching collections of the former camp. Between 2010 and 2013 around 200 interviews were conducted within the project *Jasenovac Memorial*, initiated and commissioned by a private person, a US citizen – they can be accessed online on the website titled, tellingly, [serbianholocaust.org](http://serbianholocaust.org). While Jasenovac figures prominently in the project's title, perhaps primarily as a means of its legitimization, it is orientated towards experiences of various victim groups and, according to Boris Behnen, constitutes an example of a consistent trend to "equate the extermination of Jews in the region with the genocide inflicted on Serbs, creating the impression of the collective martyrdom of the Yugoslavian people" (Behnen unpublished manuscript). Yet another project, *Zaveštanje* [Legacy] carried out between 2012 and 2015 by an NGO *Center for Fostering Memory Culture of Remembrance*, albeit different from *Jasenovac Memorial* in its focus on the child survivors of the camps of Stara Gradiška (a subcamp of Jasenovac) and the camps of Sisak and Jastrebarsko, diverts from

the representational politics adopted by the redesigned Jasenovac memorial with its focus on individual victims and forefronting of the Holocaust. The 450 hours of interviews with more than 100 witnesses translated in this case into a documentary directed by Ivan Jovič and released in 2016. Here, too, it is not the individual story that comes to the fore, but the very graphically described atrocities committed in the camps, testifying to the persistence of narrative patterns but also to the lingering need to ascertain the 'truth' of the events in view of the ongoing and unresolved contestations around the history of the camp (Byford 2020).

While the pilot character of the *Campscapes Testimony Catalogue* and the limited timeframe of the project meant that those interviews could not be included in the database, they provide an important backdrop against which to analyze existing collections pertaining to Jasenovac (and the other way around). But their inclusion here is meant, too, to indicate the open-ended and inescapably incomplete character of the tool – relying, as it does, on cooperation with and politics of access adopted by various institutions and actors, and in need of further development. Its creation, nevertheless, directed us towards lesser known or entirely obscured collections. This was not only the case with Jasenovac. Within the framework of the project we focused, too, on an exceptionally early oral history project centered on the wartime experience of Sinti and Roma, framed through the life story of one individual who survived the internment camp of Lety. In 1960s, Czech military historian Jan Tesař devoted 18 sessions, each several hours long, to record the testimony of Josef Serinek, a Roma who escaped from Lety camp and became a partisan.<sup>9</sup>

The political turmoil of the time forced Tesař to suspend the work on the biography of the 'Černý Partyzán', the Black Partisan, as Serinek was nicknamed by his comrades. He was to remain forgotten during – and after – the state socialist period. But Tesař returned to his work on Serinek several decades later. In 2016, a three-volume book *Česká cikánská rapsodie* [Bohemian Gypsy Rhapsody], centred on Serinek's life and partisan activities, was published. Perhaps the first and the most in-depth exploration of Sinti and Roma wartime experience and resistance during the Second World War, the book inspired Roma commemorative initiatives developed around the memory of the 'Romani hero'. And yet, it went largely unnoticed among Czech and foreign historians and did not, as it could have done, reinscribe Serinek and the Sinti and Roma experience of the war into the Czech and European mnemonic landscape, testifying to the legacies of exclusion and discrimination that perpetuate deeply up to the present day. But perhaps this will change when the museum planned for the Lety camp is established at the site, filling the space with the recorded voices of

<sup>9</sup> While the tapes were lost, the transcripts of the interview are still available. In this context we benefited greatly from the research commissioned to, and conducted, by Markus Pape. On the history, memory and contestations around the Sinti and Roma camp in Lety see Pavel Vareka's (2023) contribution to this issue.

survivors, amongst them of Josef Serinek, and filling in the gaps left by historical research.

Here we move on to focus on the second question framing our research on European camps and their afterlives in oral history. As indicated in the introduction, this evolves and revolves around the always selective and fragmentary use of audiovisual testimonies in the museums established at the sites, their role in creating and perpetuating the narratives about the camps, and the means through which those can also be complexified and decentralized through other uses of oral history accounts.

## Testimonies at museums

The re-evaluation of oral testimony in historical research and through the major online interview portals paved the way for the inclusion of audiovisual testimonies in museums, alongside other personal objects conventionally on display such as photographs, letters, diaries, personal items supplemented with biographical information on their previous owners. In fact, and perhaps unsurprisingly, museums devoted to the Holocaust and the Second World War, and the concentration camp memorials, were among the first to embrace this new curatorial practice (Shenker 2010; Ziębińska-Witek 2011; de Jong 2018: 6). Underway since the 1970s and 1980s, it gained pertinence in the 1990s as anxieties mounted with the anticipated gradual passing of the survivor generation (Cooke and Frieze 2017; Mandelli 2019: 95). Before (and, in some cases, still), the accounts of bodily present survivors constituted an important and integral part of the life of the museums, either by employing them as guides or by regularly inviting them to recount their stories for museum visitors. In many cases, this involved not only accounting for their pre-war, wartime and post-war experiences but also for their engagement in the creation of the very museum and the struggles to have their specific narratives heard and included in its narrative, often against the authorities, curators or other victim groups (Eschebach 1999; Berman 2001; KZ-Gedenkstätte Flossenbürg 2011). The practice of collecting video recordings by museums and memorial sites, paired with the development of new digital technologies (Thomas 2008), translated into the recordings of their voices and bodies being cast as yet another category of museum objects (de Jong 2018) – videos and extracts from interviews integrated into old, or, more often, redeveloped, permanent exhibitions.

The presence of recorded audio and visual testimonies in museum spaces can take many forms contingent on curatorial decisions dictated by their function in the overall narrative, their relationship to other objects in the museum assemblage, the architecture and the economy of the exhibition space. When included in the exhibitions, they can be presented as a part of larger audio-visual texts, combining recorded interviews with archival footage accompanied (or not) by a voice-over providing textual historical narrative, as a part of films composed exclusively

of a progression of various witness testimonies, or singled out by projection on a separate screen and played on a loop. They can be, then, variously positioned in museal space – alongside other objects on display, such as photos, archival documents, and information boards, or foregrounded through their placement in separate rooms, on blank walls, and/or in audio theatres. Each decision pertaining to placement, length, character, presence (or absence) of accompanying contextualizing information, and the accessibility of the video testimony mediates in the most critical way its sense for the visitor (Mandelli 2019: 87–89) and determines its function on display.

While museum practitioners foreground the evidentiary and didactic role of the testimonies they exhibit, scholars have focused rather on the way they come to authenticate the museum narrative through their mediated but bodily presence and idiosyncratic character of the recorded speech act – and are, in turn, authenticated by their very presence in the museum (Ziębińska-Witek 2011: 252; de Jong 2018: 164). Others have stressed the affective function of testimonies, deployed in museums as a means to invest the abstract historical narrative with the personal and intimate, and, thus, emotionally relatable – testimonies are meant to foster empathy and variously considered identification (Cooke and Frieze 2017; Kobielska 2018; Mandelli 2019). This can pertain as much to the overarching narrative or to specific objects or events thematized on display, which become affectively charged when framed through a personal account. This sense of intimacy and relationality can be fostered by the very exhibition techniques – for instance, in a moment of personalized closeness to the witness established when the visitor separates themselves from the noises and movements of the museum to watch and listen through the headphones. Equally, video testimonies of survivors are an important means to narrate, illustrate, contextualize and complement historical events and their embodied and lived aftereffects, exactly because they come from the position of situated memory.

In her 2018 book *The Witness as Object: Video Testimony in Memorial Museums*, Steffi de Jong argues that the turn towards video testimony in museum exhibitions signalled, on the one hand, that museums as institutions were ready to integrate “the very process of recalling an event and verbalizing it into their representation of history”, that “the very moment of remembrance and narrated memory have become legitimate objects of display” (De Jong 2018: 5). This was, on the other hand, considered by museum practitioners as a move towards multiperspectivity, an opening up of the museum narrative to a plurality of voices and views articulated in its space (De Jong 2018: 18). And yet, de Jong and many other theoreticians of museums, not without reason, remain critical towards the actual outcomes of this move (Kushner 2001; Ziębińska-Witek 2011; Kobielska 2018). For one, the inclusion of video testimony into a museum exhibition and its recasting into a museum object constitutes an incredibly invasive intervention into its original logic

and structure as a recorded and highly personalized life story. In order to find its way into display, the interview is subject to selection, decontextualization, cutting, and only in a fragmentary form allowed to enter the exhibition, as the excerpts sometimes last no more than several dozen seconds: several hours of biographical narration are ‘condensed’ into a one-minute clip. Also, longer excerpts are an effect of targeted editing dictated as much by the directionality of the museum narrative, their place in it as per the requirements and habits of the visitors. The fragmentariness constitutive to video testimonies at museum display, while a prerequisite for their inclusion, can pose a serious ethical challenge. In the words of de Jong, in this process “the agency over the video testimonies is passed from the witness to history to the exhibition makers” (de Jong 2018: 178–179).

This challenge is inscribed, too, into the ways the video testimonies figure on display – whether they speak with full voice and command full attention or can be easily missed and/or ignored; whether they play an elevated, equal or subordinate role to other exhibited objects. Considering the first question, Maria Kobielska (2018: 300–301) posits that “obligatory/optional” character of a given testimony in a museum experience should play a crucial role in the evaluation of its use: ‘obligatory’ means in this context that the visitor will inevitably be exposed to it while roaming through the exhibition; ‘optional’ assumes a choice to press play or pick up the headphones in order to engage with the testimony. While we see this as a means to invest the visitors with more agency in personalizing their museum experience, it is unquestionable that the decisions and museal techniques either foregrounding or backgrounding specific testimonies are, too, an expression of their narrative and performative hierarchization, the voices of some survivors or witnesses will figure as more important than those of others. This hierarchization unfolds also between different categories of objects on display (archival documents, personal objects, photographs, other artifacts), and reflects their curatorially assigned status and value as exhibits. In fact, in the vast majority of the campscapes’ museums we analyzed, the excerpts of video recordings are placed on equal or subordinate footing with other exhibited objects, more often than not the interviews cast in a mere emotionalizing and illustrative function for specific segments of the exhibitions, or as a means to make the exhibition more dynamic and attractive to visitors. In some cases, for instance at the Memorial Site Jasenovac, the specific use and foregrounding of testimonies and personal accounts (exclusively) of the victims has a deeply political meaning as it serves to push into the background the question of perpetratorship – the camp being run not by the Nazis but by their Croatian collaborators (Radonic 2009: 348–364).

As a result, the inclusion of “the very process of recalling” and of a multiperspective plurality of voices, considered a rationale behind the presence of video testimonies

on display, remains limited. More often than not, witnesses come to speak not to the specificity of their experience but to particular aspects of historical events and the presented (chronological) narrative (Shenker 2015). Moreover, even in those cases when the recordings are supplemented with basic information about the interviewee and their position within and towards the historical occurrences, the context of the interview is mostly left unaddressed, decimating its particularity as an individual memory event. This has obvious implications not only for the (limited) ability of displayed interviews to foster empathy (Schulz 2021) but also for the politics of display. As convincingly summarized by Tony Kushner (2001) in relation to the Holocaust exhibition of the Imperial War Museum in London, but can also be extrapolated to other museal settings analyzed in the project: instead of individualizing, the display universalizes exhibited accounts, “the differences are ultimately subsumed in order to achieve a narrative cohesion” – and while they serve to humanize, emotionalize and dynamize the exhibition, they “rarely problematize it” (Kushner 2001: 92). In other words, they are largely instrumentalized in the service of the story designed and exhibited in the museum, leaving little room for differentiated and differentiating perspectives that would unsettle or decentre it.

### *Remembering westerbork: the digital testimony environment*

Acknowledging the problems and limitations associated with display of audio and video testimonies in museums settings, within the framework of the project we therefore proposed to complement the on-site visitors experience at a selected campscape, the Camp Westerbork Memorial Center, with an experience of a prototype digital testimony environment bringing into a virtual dialog sensitively edited and adequately contextualized personal stories, historical place and contested memories that evolve and revolve around it. Titled *Remembering Westerbork: Learning with Interviews*, the online environment was designed to help users to prepare for a visit to the memorial.<sup>10</sup> The platform presents and contextualizes video interviews with two survivors of the camp for an interactive discussion in the classroom. Apart from two 30-minute films, the web-application in three languages (English, Dutch and German), includes photos and documents, short biographies, an interactive editor, a time-line and a glossary. The working assignments focus on issues of contested memory, which are relevant to understanding Westerbork campscape, but not sufficiently included in the exhibition.

Westerbork memorial needs to convey a complex history to its visitors. Established before the German occupation as a central camp for Jewish refugees from Germany, it came to serve later as the main transit camp in the

<sup>10</sup> learning.westerbork-interviews.org.

Netherlands for deportations to the Nazi extermination and concentration camps. After the war, Westerbork acquired yet another set of functions as an internment camp for Nazi collaborators, a refugee settlement for Moluccan families relocated to the Netherlands after the decolonization of the former Dutch East Indies, and, in the 1970s, a memorial. Survivors and their testimonies have been central to the memorial since the museum first opened in 1983, yet certain positionalities and narratives associated with the site have been privileged over others both at the exhibition and the memorial landscape. This pertained not only to the silencing of the site's (post)colonial history. But, for instance, also includes its role in exclusionary politics towards Jewish refugees in the prewar Netherlands, in wartime discrimination against Sinti and Roma, its experiential framing through nationalized tensions between various victim groups and/or their involvement in the operation of the camp and, finally, the postwar anti-Semitism that defined the lives of its survivors.

The online testimony environment *Remembering Westerbork* facilitates an interactive encounter with two Jewish survivors of the camp: Hans Margules and Ronnie Goldstein-van Cleef. Hans Margules was a German Jew who fled to the Netherlands in 1938. In 1940, he was brought to the central refugee camp Westerbork and later joined the Ordnungsdienst (OD), the camp's Jewish supervisory service. Most inmates, especially Dutch Jews interred there after the German occupation of the Netherlands – when Westerbork was transformed into a transit camp –, referred to the members of the OD as the 'Jewish SS', due to their role in securing the deportations to the extermination camps. As a member of the OD closing the door of a cattle train going to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Margules was captured on the Westerbork film, a unique piece of historical footage from the camp commissioned by its commander in 1944, which in 2017 was included in the UNESCO world register for documentary heritage. In the interview, Margules talks about his work, the film and the post-war discussions about the OD. Based on his narration and material providing differing accounts, the contested history of the Jewish Ordnungsdienst can be accessed and discussed within the *Remembering Westerbork* environment.

Ronnie Goldstein-van Cleef was a Dutch citizen. In the wake of the German occupation of the Netherlands, she went into hiding in 1942 and was arrested and brought to Westerbork in 1944. She stayed in the punishment barracks of the transit camp before being deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, then to Liebau, where she was liberated. In a chapter titled *Between Help and Betrayal*, users of the online environment are invited to analyze behaviors and experiences in the occupied Netherlands. They follow the survivor's journey through the universe of Nazi camps, after she spent only a short time in Westerbork transit camp. They are also inspired to discuss her

uneasy return to the Netherlands, where she experienced various forms of discrimination.<sup>11</sup>

The life-story interviews were edited into two 30-minute biographical interview films, transcribed and translated. Instead of grouping thematic video clips, they focus on witnesses' biographies and contextualize them with background information, photos, documents, and texts. Carefully designed tasks help users deconstruct the conditions of the video setting and actively listen to, analyse, reconstruct the biographical narrations, and reflect on the character of the virtual 'encounter' with the videotaped witness, reinstating video testimony as a historical source and a genre in its own right. *Remembering Westerbork* allows the preparation for a visit to take place in a classroom, a university seminar on-site, but also individual exploration of the site mediated by survivors' accounts. Available in Dutch, English and German, the online environment also addresses the international dimension of Westerbork and makes it accessible to foreign audiences. Based on various learning environments with testimonies from former forced laborers, developed at Freie Universität Berlin to support students in analyzing video interviews as historical sources (Pagenstecher and Wein 2017), *Remembering Westerbork* has been conceptualized and advanced in close collaboration with the staff of the Camp Westerbork Memorial Center, and in dialog with other tools developed within the framework of the *Accessing Campscapes* project (Waagen et al. 2023), and meant to complement but also decenter and complexify the narrative offered at the museum.

While it does not perhaps offer an ideal solution to fragmentary encounters with recorded testimonies in the museums established at the former campscapes or, for that matter, a viable alternative to in-depth interaction with an oral history account or video testimony watched in its entirety, the online testimony environment provides a (pilot) middle ground for museums and memorial sites willing to expand their practice pertaining to those sources and reconsider their role in framing the narrative of the site. Here, the different testimonies are not subsumed under an overarching narrative at the cost of their individuality but foregrounded exactly in their personal specificity, which nevertheless speaks to broader themes associated with the site, and allows its differentiated experience through the lens of both, or a chosen survivor account. The online testimony platform seems, therefore, better suited than an exhibitionary space for negotiating the tensions between authoritative museal and political narratives about the past and the personal accounts of the witnesses. And while it is also based on the process of selecting the 'right' witnesses, and on extensive editorial work on the recordings – and thus does not resolve all ethical issues associated with museal display of testimonies – it gives more justice to the uniqueness of the genre and the dynamics of the personal process of narrating and recalling.

11 The interview with Hans Margules was conducted in 2010 in German and is available at Memorial Centre Camp Westerbork. The interview with Ronnie Goldstein-van Cleef was conducted in 2005 in Dutch and is available in the online archive *Zwangsarbeit 1939–1945*.

## Conclusion

Both tools developed within the framework *Accessing Campscapes* and presented in this paper, the *Campscapes Testimony Catalogue*, and the online testimonies environment *Remembering Westerbork* are pilots, which, due to the economy of the project, have a necessarily limited scope. The testimony catalogue can support comparative studies, point researchers to prominent as well as forgotten survivor narratives, and help in researching contested pasts of these places. It is, however, only a momentary scan of some selected institutions. Importantly, conceptually and technologically, it serves as a prototype for a new curation and research environment for oral history collections currently under construction at Freie Universität Berlin: The cross-collection platform *Oral-History.Digital*, which will be available in 2023, and which allows for identification, assessment, categorization, and critical and comparative analysis of a myriad of dispersed oral history collections. The Westerbork environment, too, could be developed further, based on a user evaluation by the memorial on one hand, and by the inclusion of other testimonies and other engaging assignments on the other hand. In its present form, *Remembering Westerbork* privileges the perspective (however differentiated) of two Jewish survivors of the camp and, thus, makes other experience groups disappear. In the future, it could be extended to include voices of other witnesses, including those of the prisoners of the postwar internment camp and Moluccan families that inhabited the site throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, without equating all these completely different experiences, however – something not that easily implementable in the museum space due to ongoing contestations and ownership claims around the campscape, but much less challenging in an online environment.

As we found out in the course of the project, such interviews have, in fact, often been collected and are stored in museum archives yet rarely find their way into exhibitions, arrested by the expectations of survivors, authorities, visitors and dominant sensitivities. For instance, there is virtually no indication at the campscape of Bergen Belsen that in the postwar years, the site also housed Germans, who were forcefully displaced from the territories lost after the Second World to Poland or Czechoslovakia, while interviews covering this aspect of the afterlife of the camp are well present in its archive (Staats 2010). Both Falstad and Westerbork are home to accounts of Nazi collaborators interred at the camps in the early postwar period. In turn, in the archive of Treblinka, one can watch interviews with local Poles who admit to robbing the site, and human remains, during and in the immediate aftermath of the war (Dziuban 2015). While such accounts do not sit nicely in the frame and genre of video testimony developed in dialog with and dedicated mostly to survivors and are still to be subject of extensive academic research, they, nevertheless, also form the corpus of the oral histories of the camps testifying to their complex histories and afterlives. They could, too, in the future, be included in the narratives on campscapes, either in museums or online environments.

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