

Bearing Witness

The Collection and Use of Testimonies at Yad Vashem

by Leah Goldstein

As the foremost authority on the Holocaust, Yad Vashem has spent more than half a century gathering testimonies from witnesses—men, women and children—who experienced the events first hand. These testimonies take many forms: written diaries, letters and works of art from the time of the Holocaust, as well as verbal testimonies given years or even decades after the end of the war.

At Yad Vashem, witness and survivor testimonies are used in educational programs, museum exhibitions, publications and research studies, and in honoring non-Jews as Righteous Among the Nations. Survivors also continue to play a crucial role in speaking to groups of students, soldiers and educators, supplementing the narrative with personal anecdotes, thus allowing their audiences to sympathize more deeply with the plight of those swept up in the horrors of the Holocaust.

Collecting, Preserving and Digitizing Testimonies

The campaign to give and collect survivor testimonies began during the *Shoah* itself, with underground archives established in the main ghettos, such as Warsaw and Bialystok, by men and women with a strong historical

awareness. When the war ended, testimony-gathering centers were established in many locations, including Lublin (the Historical Committee), Paris, Bratislava and the American Occupation Zone (the Committee of Liberated Jews). The first testimonies about the Holocaust were heard in *Eretz Israel* during the war itself, from refugees who arrived there from Europe and other countries. By the time Yad Vashem was established in 1953, some 15,000 testimonies had already been gathered, forming the basis of its future archive collection, research, education and documentation activities.

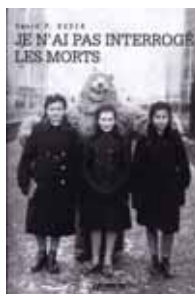
One of the first departments to be established at Yad Vashem was the Oral History Section, part of the Archives Division. To date, this department has collected some 45,000 written, audio and filmed testimonies documenting the personal stories of the survivors, and through them, those of the families and communities destroyed during the *Shoah*. Last year, it widened its activities and scope by allowing aging and often ailing survivors, unable to get to one of the many studios dotted around the country, to be filmed in their own homes. In the past year alone, 880 personal interviews were conducted with such survivors, many of which have added unique insights and information never before revealed about the Holocaust. Other projects undertaken in recent years by the department include: a special testimony center established in cooperation with Ginzach Kiddush Hashem for the benefit of the ultra-orthodox population; and the translation of testimonies from different languages—including most recently Serbo-Croat—thus widening their accessibility to the wider population. In the coming months, testimonies in Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) will also be recorded, increasing our knowledge about the fate of the Spanish-speaking Jewish population during the Holocaust. In addition, the department has begun to film group testimonials, as well as survivor reunions, moderated by professional interviewers. These testimonies are often given in the presence of family members—spouses, children and grandchildren—thereby strengthening the intergenerational connection and dedication to Holocaust remembrance for years to come.

Yad Vashem is now in the process of **digitizing the tens of thousands of video and audio testimonies**, in all their different formats, in order to ensure their preservation as well as make them more easily accessible to the general public. This project is made possible through the generous support of the Legacy Heritage Fund of New York and Jerusalem, honoring the life work of Bella and Harry Wexner z"l of Columbus, Ohio. It is expected to be completed toward the end of 2008.

Creative Works

Yad Vashem's Museum of Holocaust Art houses over 10,500 works of art that express a different kind of testimony. Creating art during the Holocaust meant risking one's life at a time when the materials needed were almost non-existent, and many of the artists were on the verge of collapse—physically and mentally—without access to even the most basic essentials of daily life. The works produced despite these conditions thus express an awesome creative and testimonial power: the artists who produced them knew that this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to express all they wished to say to the world and future generations, in a few lines etched on paper.

Yad Vashem's Visual Center is also working hard to encourage the creation of cinematic works using witness testimonies. Last year's Yad Vashem Chairman's Award, endowed by Leon and Michaela Constantiner, for artistic achievement in Holocaust-related films at Jerusalem's International Film Festival went to "Nina's Journey," a deeply personal and compassionate film directed by Lena Einhorn. Brilliantly acted and directed, "Nina's Journey" interweaves three genres that are characteristic of Holocaust film—personal testimony, archival footage and dramatic re-enactment. By juxtaposing the three, the director underscored, yet also transcended, the limitations of each, achieving a synergy that gave her film a rare degree of truth and emotional power.



Research on Testimonies over the years

Academic scholars researching the topic of testimonies

have taken advantage of fellowships at Yad Vashem's International Institute for Holocaust Research in order to broaden their studies and gain access to vital archival information. Dr. Rita Horvath of Israel's Bar-Ilan University and Hungary's Eotvos Lorand University recently joined the Institute in order to enhance her investigations on different Jewish survivors' testimonies taken by the various large-scale historical/memorial projects initiated and conducted by *She'erit Hapletah* in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust. Her research reveals much—not only about the nature of Holocaust testimonies—but also about the ways in which they can serve as sources of historical, literal, psychological, anthropological and linguistic research. "The Yad Vashem Archives," says Dr. Horvath, "holds the most complete collection of Holocaust testimonies, and I found the Institute a special, warm and intellectually stimulating working environment."

Alan Rosen is currently writing a book on the contribution to the study of the Holocaust by David Boder, a Latvian Jewish émigré to the United States who traveled to Europe in the summer of 1946 to interview 120 displaced persons. Boder conducted his interviews in nine languages, using a wire recorder. Rosen is attempting to decipher how Boder's postwar interview project—and the ongoing task of transcription that followed—compel us to revise the history of Holocaust testimony. "My Institute fellowship enabled me to review material from other early postwar interview projects—especially those that, beginning in the 1950s, recorded interviews with survivors—as well as to study the evolution of victim testimony, particularly at Yad Vashem," explains Rosen. "In addition to the use of material from the archives and library, I benefited greatly from discussions with Yad Vashem staff."

Names Collection: A Personal Mission

The project to redeem the name of every single Holocaust victim is also, of course, a form of personal testimony by the people who submit the names. Since its inception, Yad Vashem has collected over 3.1 million names, with some two-thirds

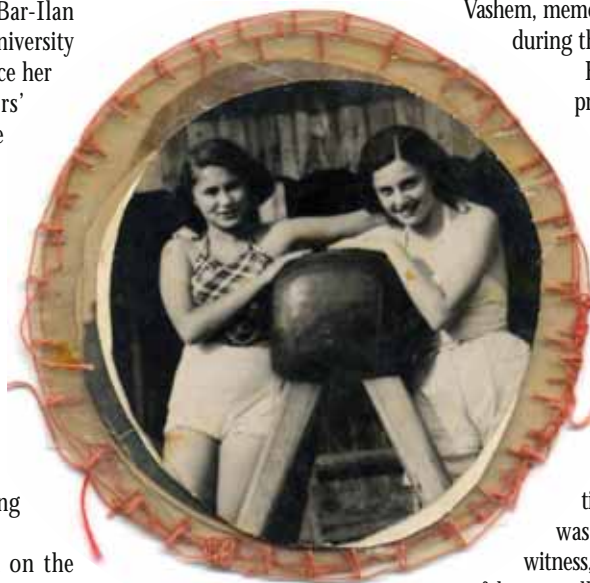
recorded by relatives and friends of the deceased on Pages of Testimony—official forms stating the victim's name and a few biographical details—which are then stored in Yad Vashem's Hall of Names and the online Central Database of *Shoah* Victims' Names.

Many survivors have partaken in this vital mission, submitting single names or those of whole families—as many as they can remember—in order to memorialize them for posterity. But for Michal Beer (77) of Tel Aviv, this has become a life mission: to date, she has single-handedly submitted over 450 Pages of Testimony to Yad Vashem, memorializing all the people she knew who perished during the *Shoah*.

Born Maud Shtecklmacher in 1929 to a prominent family in Czechoslovakia, her future looked bright. But the dark clouds of WWII stripped Maud of a normal childhood, sending her instead to Theresienstadt where—though she, her sister and her mother miraculously survived—she witnessed the death and deportations of her father and 70 other members of her extended family.

Michal has a near photographic memory, recalling in remarkably vivid detail hundreds of *Shoah* victims from her hometown of Prostejov. "I relive it all the time. I came so close to death myself; my suitcase was sent to Auschwitz, but I remained. I am a witness," she says. Immediately following the war, she felt compelled to submit names to Yad Vashem. "I was living on a remote *moshav*. I was poor, with a small infant, but the moment I found out that Yad Vashem had opened offices, I submitted the names of my closest family and friends." Although many names already appear on various archival lists, Michal says she will not rest until she has personally submitted a Page of Testimony for each and every person she remembers.

"My son often asks me why I need to be so obsessed with names all the time—so many names. I tell him every name is a person, every name is a soul," explains Michal, who chalks up her stubborn determination to her desire to do something for her childhood friends who died so long ago, but whose memories continue to pursue her. "When a plane flies overhead, or I see skyscrapers, I think of my friends," she says. "Every summer morning, on my way home from swimming, I stand on a hilltop high above the sea, and I think about them—my friends—who never saw these things, who were not allowed to live."



Photograph of Michal Beer (left) and her friend Ruth Weisz in an album made for Michal for her 15th birthday in Theresienstadt by her mother.