

***Remembering and Rethinking:
The International Forum on Collecting,
Preserving, and Disseminating Holocaust
Testimonies***

Lancaster House, London, 19-20 April, 2023

Report on Proceedings
Dr. Jaime Ashworth

All the sessions at the conference were recorded and made available online via the AJR YouTube Channel. This document is partly intended as a “finding aid” for those interested in either returning to the themes of the conference or exploring these issues in general. A short reflective essay at the end of the report offers some thoughts on the possible conclusions and questions to be drawn.

Day One: 19 April, 2023

The first day of the conference was mainly concerned with the academic work being undertaken to gather testimony and to understand the cultural and historical contexts in which that acquisition takes place.

Welcomes

More than 200 people met to hear fifty speakers representing 32 separate organisations gathered in the magnificent setting of Lancaster House to consider the ways in which Holocaust Testimony is gathered, stored, and used in educating about the Holocaust. Supported by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany, the conference was an extraordinary gathering of some of the talented, passionate and curious individuals who work in the field, and a remarkable chance to reflect and connect.

Opening remarks were made by **Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon**, representing our hosts, the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). He drew attention to the 80th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943, reminding attendees that just as the fighters of the ghetto refused to be sent to their deaths, we too have a duty to act, because “the Holocaust, if we do not act, will not be part of our memory.” He also drew attention to the personal stake many in attendance had in preserving the history. Testimony comes from “Victims who became survivors who became advocates.” He pledged that the UK will “defend freedom and protect the truth.” Lord Ahmad’s sentiments were echoed by **His Excellency Miguel Berger**, the German Ambassador to the United Kingdom. He also drew attention to the transition from living memory to stories told by the first and second generations.

[AJR](#) Chief Executive **Michael Newman OBE** took a broader approach to the theme of the conference, noting the way in which retelling the past is an important part of Jewish life. At the recently-passed festival of Pesach (Passover), he pointed out, the book which structures the celebration is the *Haggadah* - the telling. But he also warned of the dangers of inaccurate or mendacious *retelling*: the spectre of either

“hard” or “soft” Holocaust denial¹ was to be a recurring theme. He also encouraged attendees to engage in a process of retelling as the conference happened, directing them to the conference hashtag, #WhyHolocaustTestimonyMatters.

These themes were all referred to in the first keynote address by **The Rt. Hon. the Lord Pickles**. Also referring to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, he reminded the audience of the work of Emanuel Ringelblum and the members of the *Oneg Shabbat* archive, suggesting that it was in their spirit of preserving the truth that we convened. He also referred to other pioneers such as Eva Reichmann of the Wiener Library or Patrick Gordon Walker of the BBC, whose reports from Belsen recorded the first religious service after liberation. Though Walker was adamant that “The reality was *indescribably* worse than these pictures.” As we approach the task of educating the first cohorts of school pupils to grow up in a world without survivors, testimony is therefore the key to memory, since only those who were there can get close to describing what it was.

Lord Pickles also made an announcement: that the government and the AJR will be convening a working group, involving many of the organisations represented by speakers and audience members, to establish a **UK Holocaust Testimony Portal**. Papers and presentations, therefore, were to be of more than academic interest. Rather, they were to be strategic documents, setting the direction for the work ahead.

The final contribution in this opening session was by **Dr. Bea Lewkowicz**, Director of the [AJR Refugee Voices Testimony Archive](#). She set out the themes of the conference in the context of the project’s twenty-year anniversary. Initially setting out to record 150 testimonies, the collection now includes 280 recordings, describing a broad range of experiences before, during, and after World War Two. Dr. Lewkowicz began, though, by going back to her early experience of conducting research for her PhD in Thessaloniki/Salonika. One survivor she spoke to, subjected to medical “experiments” by Josef Mengele in Auschwitz II-Birkenau, broke off the interview, saying “I cannot speak much because I get sick from this story, do you understand?” We are *custodians* of testimonies, Dr. Lewkowicz reminded the audience. Questions asked, or *not* asked, can shape individual, local, national and international memory cultures. For this reason, we need to ensure that we not only disseminate testimony, but encourage “testimonial literacy” - what Noah Shenker has described as “an eye and ear for sensing the layers, ruptures, and tensions that mark the processes of giving

¹ “Hard” denial is generally understood to mean outright denial of the Holocaust or claims about the factuality of events or locations: encapsulated in the title of a “denialist” text from the 1970s; *Did Six Million Really Die?* By contrast, “soft” denial is apparently conceding that many Jews died, but “asking questions” about details with a view to reducing the overall death toll and (by implication) attacking key facts of the Holocaust such as the existence of the gas chambers. The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance developed a [“working definition of Holocaust denial and distortion”](#) in October 2013. For a more discursive assessment of the two phenomena, see Robert Eaglestone, *Postmodernism and Holocaust Denial* (Icon Books, 2001).

and receiving accounts of the Shoah."² The papers and presentations of the next two days were assembled to help us all in developing this in both ourselves and others.

The real opening to the forum, in many ways, however, were the words of survivors themselves taken from the Refugee Voices archive. Two statements were particularly resonant to this author. First, John Izbicki's injunction that we should "Think of the past. But don't let it become the future." And secondly, the question of Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, survivor of the women's orchestra in Birkenau: "Have we made any progress? This is what I'm asking myself."

Session 1: Collecting Holocaust Testimonies in Cultural Contexts - Early Testimonies

Professor Sara Jones began the day lucidly and powerfully. Launching the [Palgrave Handbook of Testimony and Culture](#) she made the important framing point that testimony is produced, consumed, and *transformed* in cultural contexts. As an example, she raised the important question of why and how Holocaust survivors are given social and official permission to speak, while others, for example refugees fleeing persecution, are not. There are important questions to answer about the power relations and cultural processes that underpin such decisions.

Professor Joanna Michlic brought these themes together in her discussion of what drawings by child survivors can tell us, both about the past and the nature of survival. What we deem a testimony rather than an "ego-document" will have implications for how they are collected, stored, valued, and interpreted. **Dr. Christine Schmidt** and **Dr. Barbara Warnock** of the [Wiener Holocaust Library](#) raised this while exploring the pioneering work of the Library's first Director of Research, Eva Reichmann - noting that while she and her team did incredibly useful work in collecting testimony, they did not accord it full status as evidence. As they put it, Reichmann regarded testimony as plugging gaps in evidence, rather than constituting real evidence in its own right.

Session 2: Oral History as a Historical Source - a Critical Evaluation/ Testimonies in the Field of Refugee/Holocaust Studies

Dr. Andrea Hammel ([Aberystwyth](#)) described her work with [Holocaust survivors and refugee witnesses in Wales](#). While she rejected the comment by Wolfgang Benz that "the eyewitness is the enemy of the historian" she also acknowledged a tension between veracity and authenticity, noting the important role of testimony in making the past engaging. She also noted the importance of the context in which testimony is encountered: an exhibition of her work was exhibited at the *Senedd* in Cardiff and

² Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony*. Indiana University Press, 2015, p. 2.

then at the Palace of Westminster - what, she wondered, did the testimonies mean in that altered context?

Professor Dan Stone ([Royal Holloway](#)) used examples from the [ITS Archive in Bad Arolsen](#) and demonstrated that much fundamental research remains to be done. Only properly opened to researchers in 2007, the Arolsen Archive contains historical gems, some of which Professor Stone shared with the attendees: a very early account of Treblinka (from 1943) was particularly resonant, since it described a camp which was being destroyed as the testimony was given.

Professor Tony Kushner ([Southampton/Parkes Institute](#)) thought about the reflexive nature of testimony and oral history, asking who testimony belongs to and what could or should be done with it, highlighting the work of Henry Greenspan in developing collaborative models of testimony. His overall theme was of the power relations inherent in “taking” testimony and the “social imperative” to remember, which can be seen by institutions as allowing them considerable scope (even licence) to edit and deploy witness testimony in ways which may or may not reflect the witnesses themselves. He used the example of testimony by the late Vera Karoly, given to the USC Shoah Foundation after being “hounded” to do so for almost a decade. When asked to describe Bergen-Belsen, she responded ‘It was horrendous... what can I tell you? Use your imagination.’ Her refusal to engage with “redemptive” narrative culminated in her response to a request for a message for future generations: ‘nobody can understand what I’ve been through’, she shouted.

Session 3: Panel Discussion - Producing Holocaust Testimonies - Perspectives from Interviewers and Interviewees

The question of ownership was embodied in a powerful panel about the collection of testimony, including survivors **Jackie Young**, **Eva Clarke BEM**, **Kurt Marx BEM**, alongside interviewers **Dr. Rosalyn Livshin** and **Natasha Kaplinsky OBE**. It is vital to remember that the testimonies we watch and listen to are human products. Whether they are taken from the witness or co-created with the witness is the result of how interviewee and interviewer connect and work together. Dr. Livshin clearly argued that the approach of Henry Greenspan - to create testimony *together* - has been her preferred strategy in a 30-year career in which she has worked with almost all the major collectors of testimony. The human significance of this was given acutely human form by survivor Jackie Young, who explained with great emotion that giving testimony was a core part of “picking up the puzzle pieces of my life.” We must treasure testimony not just because it is important, but because it constitutes a unique record both of what happened and of the experience of having survived it.

Moreover, the impact on the witness of eliciting and facilitating testimony was also raised. Dr. Livshin was visibly moved as she recalled particularly challenging

moments. Though she tried to ensure that survivors did not become lost in recounting their trauma, ensuring that the interview remained ongoing, she also noted that some of what she has heard “lives with me to this day.” Natasha Kaplinsky echoed this, noting that in the course of interviewing survivors for the UK Holocaust Memorial, there were “enormous amounts of tears; a lot of them were mine.”

Session 4: Collecting Holocaust Testimonies in Cultural Contexts - Institutions and their Collections

The day concluded with a series of presentations by representatives of four major repositories of testimony: Yad Vashem; the British Library; the Imperial War Museums; and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Ofer Lifshitz spoke via internet from Jerusalem, reminding attendees that [Yad Vashem](#) is profoundly located in its geographical and cultural context, not simply a museum but an agency of the state. He drew attention to the fact that Yom HaShoah, the date in the Jewish calendar for commemorating the Holocaust, had just passed. His clip of Attorney General Gideon Hausner speaking at the Eichmann Trial gave real solidity to his statement that the survivor and their testimony play important roles in “affirming Israel’s ethos and *raison d’être*.” The “six million accusers” invoked by Hausner cast a long shadow.

James Bulgin, curator of the [Holocaust Galleries](#) at the Imperial War Museum (London) spoke passionately about the importance of testimony from survivors and subsequent generations in the development of the new exhibition. He pointed out that the testimonies collected for the Holocaust Exhibition in the 1990s are virtually the only visual testimony in the Museum’s collection of recordings, which run to some 56,000 hours. He also noted that the testimonies were a departure from earlier recordings, which remained firmly focused on a specific subject rather than what an individual might choose to say. While the testimonies do not play the structuring role they did in the previous exhibition, they are now presented unedited, with gaps, hesitations and other “disruptions” left in, bringing home that testimony constitutes the “human identity of the genocide’s traces.”

Dr. Madeline White of the [British Library](#) and [National Life Stories](#) described the development of the institution’s extensive holdings, highlighting the importance of the “long life story” approach partly pioneered in some earlier testimonies. She highlighted the importance of categorisation, noting that the boundaries between “immigrant stories”, “refugee stories” and “survivor stories” are shifting and porous.

James Gilmore of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum concluded the day by describing the vast breadth of the museum’s [Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive](#), including liberators, bystanders (and even a few perpetrators) as well as rich

collections of survivor testimony. He described how the demands of the COVID pandemic had shifted collection of testimony online, which has boosted their reach while reducing the cost of building up the collection. While he clearly recognised that face-to-face encounters had a special quality, the issue of balancing reach with cost was never one which could be ignored.

Day Two: 20 April, 2023

The second day began with a welcome from **Alex Maws**, Head of Education and Heritage at the AJR. He noted that while we had been privileged to hear from a panel of survivors on the previous day, as the focus of the conference moved to education, we had to acknowledge that we are moving toward a world in which there are no survivors left. While that prospect raised considerable emotion, partly due to the demonstrable impact of testimony and partly due to the personalities of the survivors themselves (many of whom were still ‘in the room’) we need to recognise that we will have to decide how that reality is incorporated into everyday practice in the classroom and elsewhere.

Sessions 5 and 6: Curating Holocaust Testimonies in the Digital Age - Testimonies in the Spaces of Learning

The first session of the day showcased four very different institutional answers to Alex Maws’s challenge. **Dr. Cai Parry-Jones**, Digital Archivist and Data Manager for the projected [UK Holocaust Memorial](#), described the work so far: 112 interviews by Natasha Kaplinsky OBE with survivors living in the UK, fitting the institutional remit to “explore the history of the Holocaust from British perspectives”, including criticism and questions. He also began a recurrent theme of the day (also raised by Bea Lewkowicz in her welcome) of the technical requirements for recording. If testimony is to really give to the future, it must be “future-proofed” through the highest possible technical standards. In this case, moreover, the testimonies are archived in the National Archives at Kew: also a powerful tribute to the social and cultural importance of testimony.

Jody Spiegel, Director of the [Holocaust Survivor Memoirs Program](#) at the Azrieli Foundation in Canada, explored how written testimony is also an important vehicle for education and memory, and can tell stories even when the survivor themselves has either died or suffered mental decline. Using the case-study of Molly Applebaum, who survived the Holocaust in hiding in rural Poland,³ she explored how survivors can choose to emphasise or suppress elements of their stories. In this case, Molly’s sexual exploitation by her rescuer was suppressed in a memoir for her family but recorded in some detail in her diary written at the time. By publishing the two texts together, the reader is enabled to ask challenging and important questions about what may be lost or found in particular contexts. She also noted the importance of categorisation: Molly insisted that the “tag” of “Rape/Sexual Assault” be removed from her testimony to the USC Shoah Foundation. Spiegel also highlighted the importance of factual and historical accuracy: since (in her words) “Holocaust awareness is different from Holocaust knowledge” we must ensure that all information is as correct as possible.

³ Molly Applebaum, *Buried Words: The Diary of Molly Applebaum*. The Azrieli Foundation, 2017.

Shannon Biederman of the Sydney Jewish Museum gave a fascinating presentation of the work of her museum. Occupying a key position in the educational and cultural life of the city, she emphasised the shift towards the future of Holocaust memory. Their flagship exhibit is called [Reverberations](#) and asks visitors to match the survivor responses to the question “Why do you share your story?” by asking visitors to explain “How have these stories inspired you?” The use of AI to allow “conversation” with recordings is a powerful but provocative departure.

A more obviously theory-informed approach was described by **Dr. Anika Reichwald** of the [Jewish Museum Hohenems](#) in Austria. Using the organising concept of *Zeitszeugenschaft* or “contemporary witnessing”, the touring exhibition makes explicit the importance of modes of narration and the choices made by survivors, institutions, technical experts, and visitors to turn artefacts into *stories*. The underlying assumption that testimony has to be understood as a product rather than a “discovery” ensures that “we certainly have not reached the end of contemporary witnessing, but rather look into an interesting future.”

Following a break, a more direct kind of curating was explored in the subsequent session, which combined curation with collection. This began with **Marc Cave** of the [National Holocaust Centre](#), showcasing the centre’s testimonies “going beyond the Holocaust to the whole person.” He again made the case for the interactive possibilities opened up by AI, and demonstrated examples of testimonies which confronted the visitor with uncomfortable responses including sadness, grief, and anger. A similar approach was described by **Angela Shapiro** of the Scottish organisation [Gathering the Voices](#), partly in response to the insistence on particular kinds of story or narration insisted upon by other organisations. The depth of her knowledge of the survivors she works with was beautifully apparent in her quotation of her mother-in-law’s insistent statement that “We are not victims; we are individuals who have contributed to society.”

Dr. Alessandro Bucci reflected on the early phases of [Holocaust Centre North](#) and its attempt to tell “a global history through local stories” in the context of the COVID pandemic and the shrinkage of its founding community, the Holocaust Survivors’ Friendship Association. By combining archival collections with a programme of artistic and cultural residency, the centre ensures that its historical collections are explored in the present in relation to contemporary issues.

Michał Chojak of [Yahad-in-Unum](#) described a process of collection that is very much ongoing. The organisation has identified more than 3000 sites of mass murder during the Holocaust across Central and Eastern Europe, and is still doing more to document and record them, collecting testimonies from witnesses and bystanders: emphasising that the Holocaust was not carried out in secret, but under the gaze of non-Jewish

inhabitants, whose evidence has been largely overlooked outside a few notable cases, such as the Jedwabne *pogrom* in July 1941.

Session 7: Teaching and Learning Through Survivor Testimonies

These sessions showcased the huge creativity and depth of effort applied to using testimony in Teaching and Learning. Because of the sheer quantity of work being done in educational settings, three parallel sessions focused on different aspects:

7a. Experiences, Research and Learning Resources

Prof. Dr. Christina Bruning ([Marburg University](#)) began the session, reflecting on her work with “interactive biographies” and their audiences. She noted that the experiences are powerful, though some participants also reported a sense of the uncanny (*unheimlich*) or even gruesome (*grüselig*) nature of such encounters among some users. She also raised the issue of who can be considered the author of such experiences. **Ruth-Anne Lenga** of the [UCL Centre for Holocaust Education](#) spoke movingly of also bringing a survivor who is no longer alive into the classroom by reflecting on the importance of Auschwitz survivor Leon Greenman on her practice and the work of the centre. She noted that talking about the Holocaust became “the meaning of his survival” and stressed the importance of *affect* in learning about the Holocaust. **Dorothee Wein** ([Freie Universität Berlin](#)) discussed the use of video interviews in schools, noting that the “site” of the classroom may now be on a smartphone or other device, and that this means thinking about how responsive a given resource can be, as well as the importance of providing context.

7b. Oral History Portals and Learning Resources

The session began with **Verena Nägel** (Freie Universität Berlin) describing the project [Forced Labour 1939-1945](#), which contains 590 testimonies as a memorial to the 20,000,000 forced to work for Nazi Germany. Because this site is not purely Holocaust-focused, it provides an interesting example of how memory is not easily divisible from other events and processes. Nägel also stressed the importance of maintaining a balance between accessibility and appropriate usage, with the resource “as open as possible but as protected as necessary.” **Dr. Victoria Kumar** discussed her work at [Erinnern.at](#), and especially the challenges of collecting and curating testimonies from contemporary witnesses from a variety of different archives, with different styles and methodologies. She particularly highlighted the possibilities of working with multiple testimonies from the same witnesses, with the opening created for reflection on differences in content and emphasis as a result. She also noted the importance of postwar history, with the creation of many projects in Austria in 1986 “after Waldheim”. **Dr. Paula Cowan** (University of the West of Scotland) spoke about [Vision Schools Scotland](#) and the challenges of revising educational resources written

with and for living survivors now they are no longer alive. She also noted the importance of ensuring that teachers are given the contextual information they need to deliver the resource - we cannot assume that users are experts.

7c. Creating Drama and Art with Testimonies

Cate Hollis of [Voices of the Holocaust](#) described the process and principles behind the creation of their flagship project; the play *Kindness* based on the life of Susan Pollack OBE. Although Susan has been a prolific speaker and has recorded her testimony on many occasions, she and her collaborator Mark Wheeler decided to interview her again and used the transcript (complete with pauses, hesitations, and struggles to explain) as the basis of the piece. **Paula Kolar**, Curator of Contemporary Practices at Holocaust Centre North described her work with survivors in creating [zines](#), championing them as “tangible traces of marginal communities akin to the *Yizkor* books produced by survivor communities in the immediate aftermath of WW2. She spoke with particular warmth about her work with the late [Iby Knill](#), whose memorial page at HCN clearly draws on this approach. The session concluded with artist and educator **Caroline Slifkin**, talking about her project [Keepsakes of the Kindertransport](#), and the ways in which art can allow survivors to make holistic statements about their whole lives, as well as involving second- and third-generation witnesses.

Keynote 2: Robert Williams (USC Shoah Foundation)

The brilliant keynote by **Dr. Robert Williams** of the [USC Shoah Foundation](#) explored not just the significance of testimony, but challenged any easy pessimism about the future. He argued that a wider understanding of the audience for education was needed: people need to revisit and re-examine what they learn at school as professionals, as adults, and above all as parents. Audiences need to be presented with history that integrates the history of the Holocaust with the history of antisemitism, but which also recognises that those involved in the Holocaust were not born to be victims. He reminded all attendees that their work is both important and part of a global effort to educate and commemorate.

Session 8: From Testimonies to Books

Three authors of quite different books about the Holocaust gathered to talk about the process of researching and writing the lives of individuals, and the huge sense of responsibility to the past that attaches to such an endeavour.

Journalist and broadcaster **Jonathan Freedland** read from his book *The Escape Artist*, based on the lives of Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, who escaped from Auschwitz II-Birkenau in April 1944 and wrote a report which led the Hungarian leader Miklos Horthy to halt the transports from Hungary in July 1944. Freedland spoke particularly of the huge sense of responsibility he felt as he was handed the personal letters of Rudolf Vrba to use in the book - an example of how there are still discoveries to be made.

Karen Baum Gordon spoke very movingly of writing her book *The Last Letter*, an attempt to reconstruct the life left behind by her late father, and to explain his attempted suicide at age 85, saying in his note "I am a tortured soul". This hugely poignant reminder of the very real consequences of the past in the present was a moment of huge personal vulnerability and bravery.

The final author was **Lord Daniel Finkelstein OBE**, who read from his family history, *Hitler, Stalin, Mum and Dad: A Family Memoir* (June 2023), an account which reminds us of the ways in which family history happens across multiple contexts. The scratch of emotion in his voice as he read the list of names of family members was a sobering detail in the session.

Session 9: Panel Discussion on Second/Third Generation Testimony

Two out of the three speakers in Session 8 are the children of survivors. This panel was a chance to explore in greater depth the historical, emotional and practical challenges of carrying on the testimony of forebears. **Hepzibah Rudofsky** began the session with a detailed account of how she developed her organisation [Surviving the Holocaust](#) around the testimony of her mother, the late Lady Zahava Kohn MBE.

This was followed by a Q&A with **Anita Peleg** of [Generation 2 Generation](#), **Hannah Goldstone** of the [Northern Holocaust Education Group](#), and **Noemie Lopian**, who tells her family story through the organisation [Holocaust Matters](#). Their answers demonstrated the huge effort that is put behind establishing and maintaining such projects, as well as the huge sense of familial and communal duty that underpin them. In an exchange with Robert Williams after his keynote, Anita Peleg had said "the second and third generations are here: use us." As Noemie Lopian put it, with huge passion, almost shouting, "How can I carry it forward?"

Session 10: Thinking Beyond the “Era of the User” - Editing, Remixing, and Re-using Testimony in the Digital Age

The final session was the most future-focused, with participants setting out how the use of testimony might look as “new” technologies become established parts of life. Sadly, one participant, **Dov Forman**, who has helped his great-grandmother [Lily Ebert](#) to engage and enthuse huge audiences via social media, was hampered by technological difficulties from participating remotely from Poland.

Dr. Kate Marrison gave a summary of how she and her colleague Dr. Victoria Grace Walden developed a series of recommendations for the collection and use of digital material. The [reports](#) themselves are a valuable resource for educators, curators, and policymakers. What was perhaps more striking, however, was the way in which the process described could be used as a model for other similar projects, working with more than 80 representatives of different organisations to create pithy and practical reports which can be used by practitioners.

Dr. Rachel Pistol described the development of the [European Holocaust Research Infrastructure](#) (EHRI). Initially conceived in 2010 as a four-year project to better coordinate research and access resources transnationally, it is seeking to become a permanent institution in its own right. Already an invaluable resource for researchers and educators, the plans suggest the future will be very exciting indeed.

The final speaker, **Jaya Pathak** of [Yet Again](#), gave a very personal reflection on how she had progressed from participating in the Holocaust Educational Trust’s *Lessons from Auschwitz* project to becoming an active campaigner in her own right. Her words, “The Holocaust seems like it was so long ago, but in the broad span of human history it really wasn’t”, were both immensely wise and immensely hopeful.

Concluding remarks

AJR Chairman **Mike Karp OBE** concluded the conference, noting the breadth of talent, creativity, and innovation which had been showcased over the two days. He warned, however, that attendees and the organisations they represent must be collaborative. “Let’s get things done together,” he said, “because we will accomplish so much more.” It was a beautiful note on which to end a stimulating, rewarding and challenging conference.

Reflections



Amid the conversations during a coffee break, survivors Eva Clarke BEM and Dr. Martin Stern MBE have a quiet conversation. Photo: Jaime Ashworth, April 2023.

The presentations heard during the two days of sessions were breathtaking in their scope and skill. While the recordings will allow those who could not attend to access the content, it is worth pausing to think about the sense that might be made of the conference. As I see it, there are three conclusions to be drawn.

1. Survivors and witnesses have left an important legacy in their words and recorded testimonies. The mention of many names of survivors who had recently died caused a ripple of grief in the audience. But their legacy will carry on, whether in interactive or “conventional” formats.
2. Testimony is an object of close scrutiny and academic research, with some extremely talented individuals ensuring that the issues will be engaged with clearly and with integrity. The new volume co-edited by Sara Jones on Testimony and Culture is a clear indication of the depth and breadth of the debate, including many of those present over the two days.
3. Cooperation and collaboration are the way forward. There were multiple reunions between sessions of people who work together on different projects, and almost everyone acknowledged the importance of partnerships in ensuring the best possible outcomes. The development of the EHRI will be important in this and its impact thus far has been wide-ranging. The proposed

UK Holocaust Testimony Portal announced on the first morning will doubtless also be of great use in furthering cooperation - though there will be a need to ensure equality between stakeholders. An “imperial” approach by any single organisation will be damaging to the whole network. Grant-making organisations such as AJR (the UK’s largest dedicated funder of Holocaust educational and remembrance programmes) will be key in ensuring fair and equitable practice.

These are very important things to be able to state. At the same time, the conference left me with some questions. Some of them were partially addressed but (I think) need to be dealt with more fully; some are perhaps “big” questions which have no answer - or at least, no definitive, easy answer.

1. When we say the phrase “Holocaust testimony” there is a reflex to equate this with *survivor* testimony. Of course, this is a vital element. As so many speakers emphasised, they are (in James Bulgin’s words) “human identity of the genocide’s traces” and will rightly be at the centre of any retelling of the Holocaust. At the same time, the work of Yahad-in-Unum shows the importance of gathering testimony from those who witnessed the Holocaust taking place. And the largely unaddressed issue is that of the perpetrators. Most of those engaged in working on Holocaust-related topics do so at some level to try and prevent its repetition. While the voice of the victim reminds us of the terrible human cost of genocide, it is the voices of the perpetrators which will allow us to understand how these things came to pass. How will we humanise the dilemmas and choices of the perpetrators that we wish so desperately not to become?
2. The issue of historical context also needs to be addressed. There is an understandable reluctance to adopt the perpetrator’s point of view, but the brute reality is that the perpetrators’ actions and decisions were crucial in creating the contexts which the survivors somehow escaped. What Raul Hilberg called the machinery of destruction has to be there as scaffolding for the meaningful reception of testimony. The UCL Centre for Holocaust Education has shown worrying levels of misunderstanding among [school students in the UK](#), with even more challenging data emerging from other countries. We need to ensure that the narrative of the Holocaust is understood. How can we ensure that audiences for testimony understand where testimony fits into the broader picture? How do we balance the individual survivor with the multitude that perished?
3. Another connotation of testimony is with the *word*, either written or spoken. Yet the importance of silences, facial expressions, and gesture were repeatedly mentioned. And as Joanna Michlic explored, in common with Caroline Slifkin and Paula Kolar, testimony does not always take the form of spoken or written

language - how do we ensure that these “other” kinds of testimonies are given their due?

4. As we enter the era in which recordings of survivors are what remains, how do we balance interactivity with the integrity of sources? How do we protect the sources while allowing them to be transformed into artefacts and stories which are meaningful and engaging? Verena Nägel and Victoria Kumar explained how their respective institutions have arrived at different policies regarding access, while Jody Spiegel reminded us that the solidity of the written word has a stability that should not be rejected too hastily.
5. Related to the above, there is an issue around terminology. Many speakers emphasised custodianship or stewardship as their framework for the management of testimony collections, with a clear element of responsibility to the past and concern for the future. But given that we also accept that testimony is transformed in use, is there a risk that we become too cautious in deploying testimony? It was notable that James Bulgin emphasised that he was a *user* of testimony. He cannot be accused of thoughtless or superficial treatment of victim and survivor experience, but the self-description seemed to imply a willingness to make decisions in the moment about what *could* be done. It is important to remember that in an age of mechanical reproduction we can explore the usage of copies without threatening the integrity of the “originals”.
6. At some point, we all instinctively recognise that there is a limit to the kinds of transformation that are possible without distorting the original testimony. How do we balance the “responsiveness” of learning tools with the need to ensure that we do not distort or twist the words of survivors? In an era of “deepfakes”, are *simulacra* the right way to proceed?
7. A lot of emphasis was placed on the ability of testimonies to convey the emotional or affective dimension of the past. While education has moved away from drama and role-play, there is clearly a place for this kind of expression - and with another drama series based around the story of Anne Frank just released (*A Little Light*, Disney+, 2023) the appetite of the public to consume such productions is clearly still keen. What role do those working with testimony have in the production of such cultural artefacts?
8. The transformation by the second and third generations of the testimonies given by their parents and grandparents is well underway. But how will the fourth and fifth generations, who only know their forebears in recordings, manage that work? How will their other identities interact and intersect with their heritage as the descendants of genocide? How will the broader memory of the Holocaust evolve with them?
9. Where will the education take place? While museums, as sites of both collection and display with strong educational agendas, are in many ways an ideal site to conduct Holocaust education, most learning is done by UK young people in classrooms and assembly halls. Should we bring the children to the

museum or vice versa? Should UK classrooms be more like museum learning environments? How will that relate to the broader curriculum?

There is no shortage of questions and problems. But nor is there a shortage of organisations and individuals to carry on the legacy and, in doing so, find answers to these and many other questions. Still less is there a deficit of passion, engagement, intellectual rigour, and creative ability. Though the post-survivor era is an inevitability, and closer than ever before, the huge diversity of work being done gives credence to Jaya Pathak's observation that "We don't have to be so fearful of not having survivors," though of course this will not lessen the grief at their passing.

J.A. Camden, June 2023