

Grim Expectations: Video Testimony in the College Classroom

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I STUMBLED INTO DIGITAL HISTORY almost by accident.¹ While I was still a graduate student in modern German-Jewish history at the University of California, San Diego, the university began leasing the recently completed Visual History Archive, or VHA, the world's largest database of videotaped and digitized Holocaust video testimony. The VHA originated with filmmaker Steven Spielberg, who consulted camp survivors when making his blockbuster film *Schindler's List* in 1993. Inspired by this collaboration, Spielberg went on to establish the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. Over the course of the next several years, volunteers interviewed close to 52,000 survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust worldwide.² The result of this massive effort was a digital archive containing hundreds of thousands of hours of filmed footage in thirty-three languages, currently available at fifty institutions on four continents.³ In 2006, the organization changed its name to USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education. In its sheer size and ability to muster the latest in technological and pedagogical expertise, the Institute far outstrips all other video archives anywhere else in the world. Therefore, we may expect it to have a far-reaching impact on Holocaust education in the twenty-first century. What is one to do with this well-nigh unmanageable mass of material? How should it be approached, and what kinds of pedagogical issues need to be addressed when using it in

the college classroom? It has taken me several years to formulate some tentative answers to these questions.

At first, I was admittedly wary of using video testimony in a college classroom. I wondered if interviewees could be trusted to remember events of fifty years ago with anything approaching accuracy. The fact that traditional sources would inevitably suffer when precious learning time would be devoted to videotaped interviews concerned me as much as the question of whether it was even desirable and pedagogically sound to subvert the canon by substituting interviews for established texts like Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*. I was also skeptical about the students' willingness to engage with this new resource in an actively thoughtful, critical way rather than becoming passive voyeurs of other people's suffering. None of these concerns were trivial, as I learned in March 2010 when attending the International Digital Access and Outreach Conference at the University of Southern California, the home of the Shoah Foundation Institute. Over the course of two days, scholars and librarians from around the world debated the value and problems associated with using video testimonies for the purpose of teaching and research. Some lauded the "raw" quality of the testimonies, whereas others warned against letting students jump into the archive without proper historiographical preparation. A third group expressed reservations about the emotional component of this kind of learning. Ultimately, there was little consensus on the best pedagogical application of video testimony, let alone on its intrinsic value in a college setting.

About one month after the conference, I accepted the position of program coordinator of the Holocaust Living History Workshop, an outreach and education program established to enhance the visibility and facilitate the use of the VHA at UC San Diego. My job involved working with interested faculty and creating teaching modules based on teacher specifications. I soon learned that professors responded with varying degrees of enthusiasm, or lack thereof, to my efforts to convince them of the benefit of teaching with testimony. Those who agreed to give it a try most commonly did so by asking for clips on a particular topic or historical turning point, or decided to show a brief excerpt in class.⁴ Relatively few evinced an interest in exposing their students to this new medium in a sustained manner. Since obtaining my doctoral degree, I have continued as a lecturer in the history department of UC San Diego and as project manager of the Holocaust Living History Workshop. In this dual capacity, I have had the opportunity to deepen my acquaintance with the Visual History Archive.

Over the last several years, the Shoah Foundation Institute has become increasingly aware of the unwieldy nature of the archive and the many obstacles standing in the way of widespread use. To expand access,

the Foundation created a program called IWitness, an online resource comprising about 1,300 English-language interviews from the VHA geared towards secondary education. Available to any educator worldwide, the program features numerous learning activities and the possibility of creating videos from the available footage. Like the VHA, IWitness is a highly accessible resource. The entire database is searchable by keywords, which makes inquiries on specific topics quick and easy. But therein lies the problem. In my view, it is precisely this user-friendliness that invites a sound-bite approach and thus discourages a profound engagement with an entire testimony. The advent of IWitness has made me realize that my vision of what a responsible use of the VHA entails diverges somewhat from the one propagated by the Shoah Foundation Institute. In what follows, I describe my experience with writing assignments based on VHA video testimony in several upper-division history courses taught at UC San Diego and suggest new ways of making use of this magnificent resource.⁵

The VHA in the College Classroom: History and Empathy

I used full-length video testimony for the first time in a course titled “Confronting Genocide: How Germans Remember Their Past.”⁶ Students had read Lawrence Langer’s monograph, *Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, an analysis of videotaped sources from Yale University’s Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, and they had attended a talk by a local Holocaust survivor. For the writing assignment, they viewed two entire testimonies, one from a group of Jewish male survivors, the other from a group of Jewish female and non-Jewish male and female survivors. After providing a summary of each interviewee’s background and life, students addressed questions such as the following: What is the truth value of these testimonies? How does the testimony of a Jewish Holocaust survivor differ from that of a political prisoner? Is the experience of persecution and internment gendered? What kinds of sources are most useful to study the past?⁷ The results of the assignment, and the enthusiasm with which many students responded, convinced me of the feasibility and value of the approach, and I was eager to try another format.

In a survey course on the history of the Holocaust, I introduced the students to video testimony in stages, beginning with a transcription exercise designed to expose them to a practice I call “deep listening.” Deep listening is an approach that pays attention not only to verbal content, but also to silences, gestures, eye movements, emotions, etc.⁸ To sensitize students to the institutional aspect of video archives, I showed them an excerpt from a 2002 Polish documentary titled *Pamiętam* [I Remember],

which features several VHA interviews interspersed with shots of young Jews on the March of the Living.⁹ By the time the class embarked on the writing assignment, the students were ready to study video testimony in terms of a multi-layered convergence of history, memory, and trauma, rather than as a simple uncomplicated text.

Once again, the results were highly satisfactory. The most thoughtful students demonstrated a sophisticated grasp of the issues at stake. They managed to deconstruct the medium of video testimony in a manner that displayed considerable insight and to convey an awareness of the calamity the interviewees had endured. What was largely lacking, though, was a proper attention to the witness's pre- and postwar life. I therefore decided to expand the framework of inquiry in another course titled "Holocaust Testimonies."

Inspired by Tony Kushner, I conceptualized an approach that would challenge the conventional narrative of the Holocaust, a narrative largely driven by the Nazi agenda. As Kushner points out, "[f]or survivor oral testimony to be utilized to its full potential in Holocaust representation would require the focus to be shifted from the Nazis to their victims—toward a life story approach—and for the strands of history and memory to be woven together to show the full complexity of survivor identity."¹⁰ To prepare students for this novel task, I assigned a number of written testimonies in different genres, including diaries and fiction. In addition, from the second week onward, we viewed excerpts from select VHA interviews in class and compared them with edited clips from the Fortunoff Archive and parts of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. Students were asked to record their response to each testimony in writing and to discuss their findings as a group. Thus prepared, they wrote a paper based on the life story of a Holocaust survivor.

Not all students were able to rise to the challenge. Despite detailed instructions, about half of them touched on the interviewee's postwar life only briefly, or ignored it altogether. Those who followed the prompt, however, came up with powerful new insights into the nature of surviving trauma and the human psyche's attempts to deal with it. As a result of this work, I have since concluded that analyzing video testimony in terms of a life narrative is the most promising method and therefore deserving of a separate discussion.

To be sure, students benefit from studying video testimony even when the focus is largely on the years of catastrophe. In part, this is because of the peculiar nature of the genre, a hybrid of memory, chronicle, and reflection. According to a study based on VHA interview use in German secondary schools, an in-depth engagement with video testimony fosters several different types of critical thinking skills, including source criticism

and the ability to deconstruct a text.¹¹ Beyond the cognitive realm, video testimony also needs to be evaluated for its affective dimension. As my reading of dozens of student essays shows, an attentive engagement with video testimony encourages an empathetic response born of witnessed suffering, whether explicit or implicit. Taken together, the three main aspects of learning from video testimony—source criticism, deconstruction, and empathy—enhance the students' awareness of the nature of historical evidence and the ability to practice sustained self-reflection. Through the process of viewing, students are often able to forge an emotional connection with "their" interviewee. This connection may have a lasting impact on the way the Holocaust is being remembered.

Student Voices: Source Criticism, Deconstruction, and Empathy

Source Criticism: The Convergence of History and Memory

Source criticism is arguably the *sine qua non* of historical inquiry. Students commonly assume history to be written in stone and are unaware of its constructed nature. Unfortunately, this simplistic understanding is all too often reinforced by an excessive reliance on secondary sources such as textbooks. Exposure to video testimony fosters a more nuanced understanding of historiography. "Many of the otherwise invisible assumptions about epistemology and the methodology of the historical discipline," suggests student Christopher R., "are made visible when grappling with the potential difficulties brought to the fore by the personal oral reflections of holocaust survivors."¹² Critical reflection on the nature of sources is certainly essential to a full appreciation of video testimony, and pitfalls are unavoidable. If properly prepared and guided, however, students will be able to steer clear between the Scylla of "crude cynicism" and the Charybdis of "unhelpful naivete," in Christopher's words.

Because of its inherent hybridity, video testimony is a perfect medium to make students think about the nature of evidence and to consider the important distinction between history and memory. Though commonly lumped together or even confused outright, the two are not the same, yet they constitute essential elements of video testimony. "In testimonies, history and memory are linked," writes student Tyng-Guang C.; "the memory of the past becomes present when remembered, and the past and the present are imposed onto each other. One is no longer limited to the facts of the past event, but engages in the present with the way in which an event was experienced, the underlying meaning of the occurrence, and individual subjective reality."¹³ As these observations show, attending to the all-important dichotomy between history and memory promotes profound reflections on the malleability of human memory and history.

Many students are aware of the unstable nature of human memory, especially the memory of events long ago. Student Rebecca H., for example, remarks that “[m]emory can be a great tool to recall past experiences, but it is often unreliable, inaccurate or just plain false. Memory can change with experiences that have happened since the event. Especially when the topic is something as traumatic as the holocaust, memory can be altered or tainted.”¹⁴ Though memory’s susceptibility to alteration or downright falsification needs to be recognized, it should not be exaggerated. In fact, the quest for an accurate recall of details may be less significant than the authenticity of the original experience. In this sense, even falsified memories provide useful clues about the impact of a traumatic past on an individual. Student Andrea N., for example, recognizes as much when stating that “even a misremembering of events tells us much about the nature of psychological trauma.”¹⁵ Indeed, it might be argued that misremembering allows for novel insights into the psyche’s tendency toward repression and denial as well as the collective nature of memory and its popular dimensions. This latter aspect is especially relevant when studying interviews with survivors who came into contact with famous individuals such as Oskar Schindler or Joseph Mengele—who imagine they must have done so.

Among the testimonies selected for student viewing, I included that of the German-Jewish Holocaust survivor and “Schindler Jew” Laura Hillman-Wolff. Hillman’s interview contains a glowing portrayal of Oskar Schindler, despite the fact that she had barely known him at the time of her internment. Along with several other students, Rebecca ascribes this to the impact of Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*. In this view, Hillman’s feelings towards Schindler are not the result of her own experience, at least not primarily so, but of watching *Schindler’s List*. Rebecca’s careful analysis illuminates memory’s vulnerability to the impact of popular discourses and culture, which may function either as a stand-in for absent memory (what we don’t know), as an aid or stimulus to foggy memory (what we remember only vaguely), or as a corrective (what we think we must have remembered wrongly and adjust in accordance with new information). In the absence of a clear sense of what actually happened, the mind uses other means to construct a meaningful past.

Complicating matters further, Hillman actually credits Spielberg’s film with having made her understand her mother’s fate. Karoline Wolff had been deported along with her children to the Lublin ghetto. To escape an impending *Aktion*, she hid in a cellar while Hillman found a refuge in a tunnel. Hillman never saw her again. In all probability, Wolff had been discovered and deported to nearby Majdanek, one of the Nazis’ extermination camps. Hillman does not comment on any attempt to find out what happened

to her family members. But she makes the rather extraordinary claim that watching *Schindler's List* had made her realize how her mother “ended”—an explanation that prompts Rebecca to declare: “instead of relying on her own memory, [Hillman] allowed the Hollywood-produced movie to infiltrate her memory, and tell the story of her mother’s death.”¹⁶ Hillman’s use of a film to describe “how it really was” is clearly not the result of intentional exaggeration, but of the fluidity and porousness of human memory.

As creatures of memory and forgetting, we all draw on manifold sources to tell the story of our life, and we constantly rework this story in accordance with new experiences and insights. Perceptive students evince a pronounced sense of the dialectical nature of this process. Student Dane S., who studied the testimony of Miriam Merzbacher, a German Jew who emigrated to Holland and ended up in Theresienstadt, notes that the interviewee “uses anecdotes and personal experiences to interpret the behavior and actions of the entire period of war, and feeds this interpretation back into the ways in which she understands and processes the events that transpired.”¹⁷ This is another way of envisioning memory as a multifaceted interplay of experience and recall, ever fluid and thus never complete.

The complex entanglement of past and present in human consciousness that is evidenced in Merzbacher’s testimony is similarly apparent in an interview with a German refugee named Georg Sakheim. Not a typical Holocaust survivor (if such a thing exists), Sakheim spent the years of his childhood and youth in Germany, Mandatory Palestine, and finally New York. Orphaned by the time he was sixteen, he decided to enroll in the U.S. Army and took part in the Allied invasion of Europe. Sakheim is an extremely articulate and engaging witness who shares his memories with sincerity and sensitivity. In the course of his testimony, he launches into what Tyng-Guang describes as a “tangential discourse on the Vietnam War and the notion of ‘just war’.” According to Tyng-Guang, Sakheim understood the Vietnam War in light of his own experience fighting Nazi Germany. Sakheim’s son, in contrast, had a different perspective. Tyng-Guang offers the following paraphrase of Sakheim’s account: “[Sakheim’s] son belongs to the generation that protested against the war in Vietnam, and [Sakheim] explained to his son that some wars had to be fought. In this case, he sees the war he fought in terms of the postwar discussion on legitimate war, and he sees the Vietnam War through his personal experience. In this case, the past [and] the present meet because of his personal experience.”¹⁸ In this excerpt, Tyng-Guang demonstrates a strong understanding of the fact that memories are “understood in light of present knowledge,” as he aptly puts it. Rather than simply looking for factual information, which may or may not be accurate, he recognizes Sakheim’s attempt to work through the past by bringing together experience and reflection.

To be sure, memoirs like Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* may be similarly analyzed in terms of history and memory. Video testimony is generally less polished and "finished," however, and is therefore especially well suited for this kind of critical dissection. While disentangling narrative into these two main strands is essential, a genuine deconstruction is needed to do justice to the complexity of a text. It is to this aspect of video testimony that we now turn.

Deconstruction: The Interviewer's and the Viewer's Role in the Production and Reception of Testimony

A deconstructive approach to video testimony fosters analytical and critical thinking by making students ponder the many factors that affect the shape and reception of a particular testimony. In this respect, the interviewer's capacity to alternatively guide or derail a specific testimony is as worthy of consideration as the interviewee's own subject position and the viewer's preconceived biases and expectations.

In my experience, students tend to have mixed views on the interviewer's role. While some students welcome follow-up questions and demands for clarifications, others are critical of a particular interviewer's excessive interference in a narrative in progress. Whenever insufficient attention is paid to the dialogic aspect of interviewing, the quality of the testimony suffers and ultimately fails to reveal its internal dynamics and narrative coherence.

Take, for example, the testimony of Helena Tichauer, a Polish camp survivor. In an astute study of Tichauer's testimony, student Meredith B. denounces the interviewer's continual interference in the testimonial process. At its worst, this style of questioning degenerates into an incessant and highly intrusive investigation—with deplorable results. Thus, Meredith suggests, "If Helena had been allowed to just talk freely without answering specific questions, new stories or new memories may have popped up, and the conversation could have gone a completely different direction."¹⁹ Meredith's critique is to the point. At the same time, it should be noted that a total absence of interference may not be the solution either. As the two veteran interviewers of Holocaust survivors Henry Greenspan and Sidney Bolkonsky maintain, paying attention to chronology may invite a "fuller recounting rather than constricting it," and some interviewees actually welcome the protective function of the process.²⁰

Of course, interviewers are generally acting in accordance with the guidelines of a particular archiving institution. In this respect, the Shoah Foundation's choice of volunteers—rather than extensively trained professionals—has undeniably had a negative effect on the quality of many testimonies. To make matters worse, interviewers were advised to spend

about 20% of their time on the prewar, 60% on the war, and another 20% on the postwar years. This rigid formula leads to a problematic focus on the experience of the Holocaust rather than the years before and after—a fact not lost on some students. Student Armando C. expresses his discomfort with the unequal allotment of time to the different parts of the interviewee's life. Wondering about the "structure and intention of the filmmakers and association" in assembling the archive, he deplors the uneven approach to different periods of the interviewee's life.

The disproportionate emphasis on persecution and the concomitant neglect of the pre- and postwar period is undoubtedly problematic. Not only does it detract from the victims' life experiences, it also predisposes viewers to exclusively focus on the tragedy as well. After transcribing an extended segment from an interview with Ursula Rosenfeld, a German-Jewish member of the *Kindertransport* who has traumatic memories of *Kristallnacht*, Armando frankly admits that he had been drawn to the "graphic tragedies" contained in these interviews. He explains: "I feel the testimony was designed in such a fashion as to guide me to these details and ensure that they are most enduring in my recollection of the videos presented." This impression is the result of insufficient flexibility on the part of an interviewer staunchly adhering to "a fixed set of questions lined up for the interview." The result, Armando notes, is a life experience recounted "within the margins dictated by the interviewer."²¹ It stands to reason that a testimony that needs to conform to the artificial 20/60/20 formula is in some crucial ways incomplete, even stunted.

To be sure, viewers themselves may bear part of the blame for the "selective listening" that often substitutes for thorough engagement with a particular interview. Approaching testimony with exaggerated or faulty expectations hampers the overall learning experience. As Armando correctly remarks, "Our expectations prevent us from analyzing the victims from different viewpoints, limiting perhaps the knowledge or lessons learned."²² Meredith agrees with this. When viewers automatically expect dramatic accounts of shootings and gassings, other important information such as "background, family life, and early childhood" is easily dismissed as "boring and insignificant when in reality, every piece of information from these interviews is an integral part of history."²³ Meredith's warning is well taken. Expectations of gruesome accounts of persecution as well as dramatic emotional outbursts may hinder our appreciation of the traumatic nature of past experiences.

What happens when a victim of traumatic events does not manifest the anticipated emotional behavior? This is the case with Helena Tichauer, whom we encountered above. In a highly insightful analysis of Tichauer's testimony, student Jihee Y. discusses the absence of emotion on the part

of the interviewee. Even when relating horrifying incidents such as her uncle smothering a crying baby to prevent discovery, or her aunt cutting her children's veins, Tichauer remains calm and seemingly unperturbed, and with good reason: to permit herself to become emotionally involved in the retelling might place Tichauer "in a shaky and destructively emotional state."²⁴ Contemplating the fragile nature of the emotional equilibrium attained by survivors like Tichauer, Jihee ruminates on the violence inherent in the interviewing process itself. In her view, the testimonial process coerces survivors to contemplate past trauma and therefore "to reopen their wounds." To push a victim to give testimony, she warns, "is to add another form to the abuse that began with their persecution."²⁵ In the hands of a sensitive interviewer, this violence is at least minimized or channeled into catharsis. It cannot be denied that many victims welcome the opportunity to share their stories. Jihee's concern regarding the potentially damaging nature of the interview process is nevertheless valid and should guard us against taking testimony lightly.

Unrealistic expectations on the part of the interviewer and viewer often mar the proper reception of testimony. Interestingly, interviewees themselves sometimes shape their testimony in response to popular expectations, for example, by making it conform to the standard survivor tale. Student Marsha R. detects such an attempt in Laura Hillman's testimony. Hillman, writes Marsha, appears to "to be very conscious of projecting a composed and controlled exterior and of providing a temperate portrayal of events." Marsha attributes this rigidly composed demeanor to Hillman's fear of appearing too emotional, a factor that might jeopardize the value of her testimony.²⁶ When asked for a parting message, Hillman offers, "no matter how deep you sink in life and how many awful experiences you'll have in life, it's up to you to raise yourself up and start a life that can be productive and useful and helpful. You don't have to stay down all the time, you *can* make it, and only you yourself can do that."²⁷ Hillman may have worried about sounding "too depressing," Marsha conjectures, and hence felt compelled to end on an uplifting note—a concern that certainly makes sense considering the popular obsession with heroic survival and the triumph of the human spirit over adversity.²⁸ Approaching video testimony from the point of view of deconstruction makes it less likely that the viewer mistakes Hillman's optimistic parting words for a sign of closure.

Warnings to the contrary notwithstanding, deconstruction need not necessarily degenerate into relativism. For one thing, the emotional connection a viewer forges with a particular witness by virtue of listening to him or her for several hours provides a counterweight to this danger. In the following section, I discuss the affective dimension and show how it enhances the value of video testimony in the college classroom.

Empathy: The Affective Dimension and Establishing a Connection

If one were to look for the most distinctive feature of video testimony compared to written texts, one would probably fix on the issue of emotion. A consideration of the issue of empathy is essential to a victim-centered approach to the Holocaust.²⁹ According to Kaya Yilmaz, historical “[e]mpathy is the skill to re-enact the thought of a historical agent in one’s mind or the ability to view the world as it was seen by the people in the past without imposing today’s values on the past.”³⁰ In this view, identification or sympathizing with the feelings of historical actors is to be avoided, and justifiably so: historians need to be ever wary of “present-mindedness.”³¹ Nonetheless, when applied to video testimony, Yilmaz’s definition is too narrow, and the colloquial understanding of empathy as compassion may be more appropriate.

The vast majority of students view the affective dimension of video testimony in positive terms. Not only do most students *not* find their own emotional response problematic or even detrimental to learning, but in fact consider it to be the unique value of video testimony in the first place. Student Jeffrey L., for example, who watched an interview with the Polish camp survivor Morris Liebermensch, describes the emotional information conveyed as a desirable complement to traditional sources such as a textbook: “the factual information, while it provides a sense of continuity and validates the accuracy of Liebermensch’s story, is a less important aspect of Liebermensch’s testimony than are his vivid descriptions combined with the emotion he conveys and expresses.”³² Drawing on Aleida Assmann’s distinction between an event and its experience of it, Jeffrey points out that emphasizing the factual accuracy of a given testimony may ultimately be less crucial than its “description and emotion.” Emotion succeeds in conveying the lasting effect of the Holocaust on its victims, i.e., the fact that “the experience of the Holocaust never died in the souls of most survivors,” as Jeffrey notes. Witnessing these effects not only allows the viewer to “relate and sympathize with the survivors,” but also brings home the devastating magnitude of the catastrophe and thus enhances rather than jeopardizes understanding of the past.³³

Or consider student Elizabeth G.’s extended reflections on this topic. Elizabeth begins by declaring an individual’s “affective involvement with the survivor’s testimony...an undoubtedly positive thing.” She continues:

The past, and tragic events like the Holocaust especially, needs more people in younger generations to remember that these things took place. Though certainly a student or reader can take vast information to heart from autobiographies and other historical books, their involvement with testimonies such as those produced by the Shoah Foundation is invaluable.

Too often, the Holocaust becomes a tragedy that is too distanced in the past, thought of perhaps as even unreal, even for generations right after that of the survivors, and the testimonies and interviews of these witness accounts make the horror present, unforgettable, and real.³⁴

According to Elizabeth, it is precisely the emotion that allows a student to bridge the gap between an incomprehensible past and the present.

Armando extends the comparison between written and audiovisual documents further when stating that “[t]he insights gathered from these testimonies don’t leave open to interpretation the magnitude of feeling behind the events. For example, a book may contain an exclamation mark or bold letters to represent excitement, anger, etc. The reader uses their intuition to determine what the exclamation point should represent. When viewing a videotaped testimony, however, the extent of the invoked emotion is represented such as the victim wishes it to be; there is no room for losing meaning in interpretation.”³⁵ Although interpreting someone else’s emotion may not be quite as straightforward as Armando seems to assume, its impact and the empathy it calls forth are beyond questioning. Jeffrey is adamant on this point: “As humans, we have the gift of empathy, or the ability to imagine and understand the feelings of others. Liebermensch’s words and emotion allow viewers to feel, which is a positive way to learn about the past. Feeling helps people better understand the context of the era, the plight of the individual and society, and the implications of the past on [the] present day.”³⁶

Enhanced understanding born of feeling would not be possible, I believe, if the student did not forge a personal connection with the interviewee. Emerging during several hours of viewing and listening, this connection is an invaluable aspect of studying the Holocaust and its aftermath through video testimony. Andrea N.’s thoughtful reflections are pertinent in this respect: “Video testimony allows the viewer to establish an intimate relationship with the survivor; in recounting his or her story, every detail, emotion, or omission of narrative communicates the victimization and trauma the survivor endured. Only in accepting and making use of video testimony can we embrace the unique stories of each survivor to further our understanding of the experience of the Holocaust.”³⁷ The kind of “intimate relationship” that is being envisioned here depends on the viewer’s cognizance of his or her own part in the witnessing process. Andrea is clearly aware of her response to the testimony she chose to study. Because of her own affective involvement with the testimony of a Polish child survivor named Samuel Gesundheit, she decided to refer to him “by his first rather than his last name,” as she explicitly acknowledges, adding, “the personal nature of video testimony makes me feel as if I have established a relationship with Samuel and that he is telling his

story to me.”³⁸ This point is confirmed by Elizabeth, who maintains that the connection gained with a survivor or witness through close viewing “would never have existed through a simple transcript of the exact words” spoken.³⁹ Needless to say, such a connection cannot be hoped for when students are exposed to brief clips or asked to search the archive for scraps of factual information.

Ultimately, empathy may be the most important reason for studying video testimony in the college classroom. Dane is explicit on this point. The “involvement and subsequent connection” that emerges in the process of viewing, Dane writes, is “of critical importance when discussing the Holocaust and the impact it had on so many lives.” He explains why:

Though many may disagree, I argue that the preponderance of material regarding the horrors of the holocaust can and does cause a certain desensitization to the events depicted. At some point, the horror of reading about six million dead in gas chambers and shooting squads fails to achieve a real emotional impact. Instead, these long, in-depth interviews regarding specific people and specific instances reveal the human impact of the Holocaust, something that is often lost in the statistics. Creating an emotional connection creates true and genuine interest with a living, breathing person who the viewer can see has been changed and shaped completely by their experiences. That makes Holocaust testimony powerful and important and allows for true understanding and empathy, instead of dry numbers and regurgitated facts.⁴⁰

Dane touches on a sensitive point here. The problem is not only the human inability to grasp a mass murder of such gigantic proportions. The preponderance of the Holocaust in American popular consciousness must also share part of the blame. An inverse relationship seems to exist between the prevalence of ritualized Holocaust remembrance and the moral lessons supposed to be drawn from the Shoah and genuine, lasting “illumination” rather than mere instruction.⁴¹ Inevitably, Holocaust fatigue sets in, or even worse, resentment over the machinations of a supposed “Holocaust industry.” The best way to counter this fatigue and desensitization is to return the focus to the “specific, living, breathing persons” who were dehumanized by one of the world’s most brutal regimes. To do them full justice, however, we should be prepared to go beyond the experience of catastrophe and instead to consider their entire lives. The next section offers an analysis of video testimony through the lens of narrative psychology.

Life Stories

One of the greatest challenges associated with studying video testimony is the large amount of space given to the years of catastrophe. At first

glance, this seems so self-evident as to require little comment. After all, weren't the interviews conducted in the first place to preserve the memory of the tragedy? To be sure, survivors and witnesses often share their stories with the acknowledged purpose of issuing a warning to posterity. However, from the scholar's point of view, the real value of these testimonies lies in the interviewee's narrative self-fashioning—in other words, in the ways victims make sense, in the *present*, of *past* trauma. It is here that the life story approach proves most fruitful.

Life stories are stories we tell ourselves and others about our past and current lives.⁴² There is a dialectical aspect to this telling. As the linguists Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps point out, "Personal narrative simultaneously is born out of experience and gives shape to experience."⁴³ This dialectical process explains the malleability of story content and telling over time. "Life stories highlight the context within which individuals develop and through which experiences are understood," write Brian de Vries and Peter Suedfeld, who have studied the life stories of aging Holocaust survivors. Furthermore, "such stories provide textured, nuanced accounts of life course development, spawning novel interpretations and hypotheses."⁴⁴ The richest life review encompasses multiple aspects and time periods of a narrator's experience and personality.⁴⁵ Analyzing video testimony in terms of a life story demands a shift in focus from fact gathering to a concern with structure, interpretation, and meaning. The *meaning* assigned to a specific event or memory is integral to this narrator-centered approach. To illuminate this complex process of storytelling, we need to attend to the "contradictions and mythologies" intrinsic to every life story—i.e., we need to allow a story's unique dynamic to come to the fore.⁴⁶

Story telling evidently depends on listeners, and it is here that the student of video testimony fulfills a crucial task. In a profoundly insightful article, Irene Kacandes highlights the viewer's role in the production of a testimony. According to Kacandes, the witness's story is not complete at the time of recording. It takes not only an interviewee, but also the immediate recipient (the interviewer) and future viewers in the role of co-participants to make the story fully intelligible. What this means, writes Kacandes, is that "the shape and meaning of a story are produced interactively by the actual survivor *and* the multiple addresses." This creative aspect of listening and responding, while intellectually and emotionally challenging, empowers students to take their role in the production of testimony seriously.⁴⁷

Let us examine two student essays on Edith Eger. Eger was born in Kosice, Czechoslovakia in 1927. At sixteen, she was taken to Auschwitz, and later to Gunskirchen. After the war, she emigrated to the United States, where she became a successful psychologist. Today, Eger lives

in La Jolla, California and still treats patients. In a brilliant analysis, student Christina C. describes the factors that Eger herself singles out as significant for her survival and explains how in the camps, these misfortunes “became fortune”:

Recall that Eger had a low self-esteem because she did not think she was beautiful like her sisters or her friends. She recalls her ballet instructor would tell her that, “God built you in such a magnificent way that whatever happens to you, you must find the power from within”—to compensate for the things she lacked externally in appearance. Eger would harbor this in her heart and attribute that inner strength to getting through the horrendous camps. Likewise, she would give credit [to] her loneliness as a child (due to her being cross-eyed and being overshadowed by her sisters) to have helped build survival against moments of desolation while in the camps.⁴⁸

Throughout the paragraph, the emphasis is on Eger’s interpretation of *why* certain things happened (what enabled her to survive) rather than on *what* exactly happened (she survived). Christina has accurately captured her self-assessment.

Eger’s survival was only the first step toward a new life. Despite a successful career and a happy marriage with children, she struggled with survivor guilt, which Christina analyzes as follows: “Eger would continually live with the guilt of having survived the Holocaust while so many others she knew did not. One reason why she became so high-achieving in her career was that it served as a way for her to prove that her life was spared for a reason and thus, she attempted to make it meaningful.”⁴⁹ Christina notes the extreme composure with which Eger relates her story and attributes this to her professional background. After the war, Eger earned a Ph.D. in Psychology and specialized in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and this, Christina conjectures, made her “significantly more aware of her memory, emotions, and her responses towards her own personal traumatic experiences during the Holocaust.”⁵⁰ In addition, Eger’s willingness to revisit painful memories reveals that she has achieved a certain measure of closure or, in Christina’s words, “a great sense of healing.”⁵¹

Should we, like Christina, take Eger’s words at face value? Put more generally, is it really possible for a person who has undergone tremendous physical and emotional hardship to find healing? Our answer to this question depends on whether we are prepared to entrust the witness with her own story. Student Chloe J., who also studied Edith Eger’s testimony, is particularly thoughtful on this matter. Her reflections need to be quoted at length:

Eger’s story is a rather uplifting one. In her interview, she is incredibly positive, speaking more times than citable of how she was always future oriented, how she always found hope, strength, and power within herself, as her ballet master taught her. A viewer expecting to hear only the worst,

most devastatingly soul-crushing elements of the Holocaust from a severely traumatized survivor would be faced with a choice upon viewing Eger's testimony: the viewer must choose to either a) rise to the occasion and acknowledge that Eger does indeed recount the atrocities she experiences [*sic*], however, she has come to terms with her past and chosen to commit herself to a happy and successful life in which she doesn't give another inch to the Nazis, or b) consider Eger's story as of less importance and meaning because the memories of her experiences don't cause her to break down in tears in front of the camera.⁵²

Chloe's two options remind us that what is at stake in viewing video testimony is not only a disconcerting mixture of memory and history, but also a psychological process dedicated to ordering memories and giving them meaning. From the perspective of narrative psychology, Eger's explanations for her survival and subsequent accomplishments may be the most important knowledge to be gained from her testimony.

Such explanations, however, are only allowed to come to the fore if we pay attention to the internal dynamics of the entire interview. Undeniably, an exclusive emphasis on Eger's experience of Auschwitz and Guns kirchen would occlude the overall trajectory of her story, a story structured around and toward the telos of spiritual endurance and healing, as Christina noted. To "ensure an ethical treatment of testimony," Chloe insists, it is imperative to consider a victim's whole life story:

Eger's life story as a whole shows a Holocaust experience in which the Nazis did not win all. They took much from her, caused her much pain, but she had the choice to let the suffering they caused follow her entire life or to put an end to it, and take back control of her life. Without acknowledging her entire life story, we are still studying Holocaust history with a focus on the perpetrators. It is not simply about her experience during the war. The most profound and influential part of this is precisely the fact that she chose to rise above the Nazi hatred, to continue her life and come to terms with her past. Had the viewer acknowledged simply her experiences during the war, only the atrocities would be exposed. And that is exactly what grants the Nazis a psychological victory.⁵³

Chloe beautifully sums up the self-representation Eger wished to convey in her testimony. If it is true that we are the stories we tell of ourselves, then Eger's story is a story of resilience and reconciliation. To accept this is not to downplay or deny the horrors she endured—it is merely to credit her own view and understanding of her past.

Not everyone who suffered the effects of Nazi persecution is either willing or able to interpret his or her past in such a positive way. Even individuals who did not have to endure internment or years spent in hiding were traumatized by the experience of uprootedness and loss. Lorraine Allard, for example, escaped the worst devastation. One of 10,000 children

allowed to leave Germany on the *Kindertransport*, she was taken in by a foster family in Great Britain. The experience affected her profoundly, as student Irene K. explains: “Because of the tragic and unexpected loss of her parents, [Lorraine Allard] still has dreams of them in [*sic*] which she wakes up sobbing, even to this day.” But the disruption of her life was not limited to the loss of her parents. Her sheltered upbringing negatively affected her ability to “fend for herself when she moved to England,” and since she had been unable to finish her education, she “consistently worked under friends or relatives that she knew.”⁵⁴ Sadly, her ordeal did not end here. Her first husband turned out to be abusive, and Allard had to file for divorce on grounds of physical cruelty.

The difficulties of Allard’s early adult life probably amplified an already pronounced lack of self-assurance and confidence. Irene offers the following explanation:

Lorraine admits freely that she is overly sensitive, and can easily become deeply upset. She has a fear of being rejected, which is shown very clearly even throughout the interview. Before going off on a tangent, she would ask the interviewer if it was okay to talk about something different, and when the interviewer interrupted her with another question, she would not object, and answer.

Irene emphasizes this point elsewhere when stating that Allard “would often say things such as, ‘I don’t know if I’m getting too ahead of myself right now,’ or ‘Is it too early to be talking about...?’”⁵⁵ Irene senses that Allard’s repeated self-interruptions and requests for permission to tell her *own* story at her *own* pace are the result of a fragile self-esteem, which in turn may be the effect of a traumatic childhood and failed marriage. This impression is enhanced by Allard’s facial expressions and body language.

Throughout her study, Irene closely follows Allard’s spare gestures and expressive eyes and eyebrows. Attention to minute changes in face and posture enables her to draw conclusions about Allard’s state of mind and the degree of closure she has achieved.⁵⁶ This kind of insight is not gained on the cognitive level, at least not primarily so. Rather, it is obtained aurally and visually—in other words, through the senses. Sensuous knowing depends on a pronounced awareness of the corporeal evidence conveyed by the interviewee. A reservoir of somatic memories, the body discloses past trauma in the process of recall.

In an unusually sensitive analysis of the testimony of Pinchas Gutter, student Tommy U. vividly conveys the experience of approaching video testimony from the perspective of sensuous knowing. Born into a Hasidic family in Lodz, Gutter was seven years old when the Nazis invaded Poland. By the time he was thirteen, he had spent time in several concentration

camps, including Majdanek, Tschenschow, and Buchenwald. After providing a detailed overview of Gutter's prewar life, told in the past tense, Tommy switches to the present:

So far, Mr. Gutter has told his story eloquently, with a clear mastery of both the English language and English idiomatic structure. His dress is immaculate—a dark suit, white shirt, starched collar and perfectly placed tie. He speaks with a purpose, as if he is telling his tale not to alleviate his own suffering but rather to teach his audience. More so than any other interview I have watched, Mr. Gutter is totally in control. I feel that his reliving of these memories is a sacrifice he is willing to endure rather than a cathartic experience that he is undergoing.⁵⁷

As he begins to talk about the war years, Gutter's body language reveals the emotional toll sharing troublesome memories is taking on him. Tommy explains: "The memories of Warsaw seem to wear on him as he speaks. His shoulders hunch slightly, he shrinks into his suit, the starched collar slowly swallowing his neck. But still, he tries to remain calm, to keep his frame square and his voice even. Here is where I first notice that not only does this telling have a purpose, but also that the person he is performing for the camera is a creation made to suit this purpose."⁵⁸

Gutter's strong sense of determination notwithstanding, he is evidently aware of the limits of his own mental strength. Memories of the train ride to Majdanek, for example, and of his friend's murder visibly torment him. As Tommy observes, "his voice trails off, his stare lost back in time, re-watching the memories he recorded but unable or unwilling to share them."⁵⁹ Gutter's voice and eyes hint at something that is hard to grasp with words, but is literally sense-able. Sensing traumatic life experiences through listening is no easy task. As Dori Laub and Mark Klempner have shown, such listening tends to call forth multiple defenses, including a "flood of awe and fear" and an obsession with facts.⁶⁰ Ideally, a student recognizes these defense mechanisms and allows this awareness to enrich his or her analysis. To quote Tommy once more:

Throughout the portions of the interview dedicated to the camps and the suffering of the Jews I found myself nauseated. But strangely enough, it was hearing about [Gutter's] wife, his children, his life in England and South Africa and Toronto that made me cry. It was as if just hearing about these atrocities I had to put up my own defenses so that I could keep watching, but when I knew that the end was near, I could let them collapse around my feet (like the rubble that once was the walls of the Ghetto).⁶¹

As in the previous excerpts, the emphasis here is on embodied knowledge and sensuous knowing—with one crucial difference: witnessing the suffering body of the survivor now affects the student in his own body, calling forth nausea and tears.

It goes without saying that I am not endorsing learning through the conduit of secondary traumatization or, even worse, vicarious victimization. Over-identification with the victims is neither desirable nor helpful. An approach to video testimony that is properly rather than pathologically empathic recognizes the barrier between the victim and the viewer. Another's pain may be witnessed and even mourned—it cannot be experienced by an outsider, no matter how sincere and strenuous the empathizing.

For the purpose of genuine learning, compassion, in the literal sense of “suffering with,” needs to be complemented with “thinking about.” To make a real difference in Holocaust education, video testimony should stimulate, and not substitute for, research, as Geoffrey Hartman reminds us.⁶² In order for this to happen, the viewer must be involved on multiple levels, intellectually, emotionally, and perhaps even spiritually.

Video Testimony and Education After Auschwitz

Several years of using the VHA in the college classroom have brought me to a deeper appreciation of its value as a pedagogical resource. A thoughtful use of video testimony is likely to achieve the following results, depending on student engagement and ability:

- familiarity with video testimony as a hybrid genre or text in need of careful deconstruction;
- appreciation of the “constructed” nature of the past;
- recognition of the malleability of human memory;
- awareness of the lasting traumatic impact of the Holocaust on its victims;
- awareness of both cognitive and affective dimensions of learning, including embodied knowledge and sensuous knowing; and
- reflection on ethical issues surrounding oral history.

Students are far more likely to achieve these aims when exposed to entire testimonies rather than select clips. As I have argued in this paper, a sound-bite approach neither reveals the narrative logic of a particular interview, nor does it forge a meaningful connection between viewer and listener. This connection, however, is essential if we expect Holocaust education to have an impact beyond the quarter or semester.

Student essays are only as good as the materials they are based upon. Undeniably, a significant number of testimonies contained in the VHA are not useful for college teaching. In part, their unsuitability stems from the haste with which the archive was assembled.⁶³ Ill-trained volunteers intent on sticking to their questionnaire pester hapless interviewees who

are unable to follow a particular train of thought to its conclusion, or simply clam up.⁶⁴

The triumphalist format of the testimonies similarly calls into question the academic seriousness of the Foundation's vision. Interviewees were filmed in their own home, a setting that, from the first shot, conjures a story with a happy ending. To reinforce this point, at the close of each interview, family members are introduced on screen. The dead are tacitly ignored, at least by the filmmaker and the viewer. Even without this highly problematic attempt to frame interviews in terms of "heroic survival," we are left with the incontrovertible fact that some interviewees are by nature less talkative, less articulate, or less self-aware than others. In other words, character and personal affinity inevitably influence the choice of interview, but this applies to written sources as well. Ultimately, the teacher needs to be willing to engage in the laborious task of locating testimonies that best answer his or her pedagogical objective.⁶⁵

Sadly, many of the approximately 52,000 interviews contained in the VHA will probably never be viewed, let alone studied in detail. To be sure, this is a problem endemic to oral history. As Michael Frisch wrote as recently as 2008, "The Deep Dark Secret of oral history is that nobody spends much time listening or watching recorded and collected interview documents. There has simply been little serious interest in the primary audio or video interviews that literally define the field and that the method is organized to produce."⁶⁶ Frisch's sober assessment stands as a salutary warning that many enthusiastic oral historians would undoubtedly prefer to ignore: once the hype over the latest and greatest video testimony project has died down, the interviews will be left to gather dust in libraries around the world. There is no reason to believe that the fate of Holocaust testimonies will be different from other firsthand testimonies. Considering the importance of Holocaust remembrance, this prospect gives cause for alarm.

To be sure, much is being made these days of the obligation to "never forget" the Holocaust. As the last survivors are dying off, the question of remembrance has acquired increasing urgency. We are relentlessly reminded of the necessity to turn students into "carriers of the torch of memory," as Yad Vashem's guidelines of teaching with testimony state.⁶⁷ There is no shortage of suggestions on how this should be accomplished. Proposals run the gamut from "adopting a survivor" to becoming "secondary witnesses."⁶⁸ Beyond the demand to keep the memory alive, however, little is being proposed in the way of specific advice.

While I too think it desirable that the study of the Holocaust should affect one "in one's soul," to quote James Hatley, I do not see how this affect can be forced.⁶⁹ Empathy either happens naturally or not at all.

All we as teachers can do is to create the most promising conditions for its emergence. A genuinely empathetic rather than ritualized response is certainly more likely to occur if we avoid the two major pitfalls of studying video testimony: sacralize survivors by elevating them to the level of superhero or prophet, or treat them as “‘documents’ walking among us on two legs,” in Yehuda Bauer’s infelicitous phrase.⁷⁰ In the final reckoning, what matters most is the student’s awareness of the interviewee’s humanity. Armando puts it well: “it is important to understand these human beings as a person; to treat them simply as living artifacts or evidence of the Holocaust would be simply doing them wrong.”⁷¹ In our pursuit of knowledge, we should never lose sight of the intrinsic humanity of our “sources.” Individuals who survived the Shoah were neither the dehumanized caricatures of Nazi ideology, nor are they the epitomes of the current obsession with redemptive survival. Buying into either myth betrays an appalling intellectual laziness.

In his famous address on education after Auschwitz, Theodor Adorno connected barbarism with a lack of reflection. He declared, “One must labor against this lack of reflection, must dissuade people from striking outward without reflecting upon themselves. *The only education that has any sense at all is an education toward critical self-reflection.*”⁷² Genuine self-reflection is by definition beyond the reach and responsibility of the collective. Regardless of broader social forces and historical context, the truly human task always and everywhere begins with a sense of individual responsibility. In the encounter with a man or a woman who has endured some of the last century’s most destructive calamities, we are asked to reflect on the human quality of the face before us—and of our own.

Notes

1. For a concise introduction to digital history, see Douglas Seefeldt and William G. Thomas, “What is Digital History? A Look at Some Exemplar Projects,” *Perspectives on History* (May 2009); projects available at <<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historyfacpub>>.

2. On the history of the Visual History Archive, see Henryk M. Von Broder, “Indiana Jones in Auschwitz,” *Der Spiegel* 37 (1999), p. 246-264; Mark Goldberg, “An Interview with Michael Berenbaum: The Holocaust and Education,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 79, no. 4 (December 1997): 317-319; Alan Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory in America* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2001); Oren Baruch Stier, *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); and Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, trans. Jared Stark (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

3. For the Institute for Visual History Education at the USC Shoah Foundation, see <<https://sfi.usc.edu>>.

4. Incidentally, this “Holocaust-light” approach seems to be preferred by the vast majority of both secondary and post-secondary teachers. Each interview is divided into one-minute segments, and the entire database is searchable by keywords, thus making locating a particular excerpt quick and easy.

5. There is certainly no dearth of studies on Holocaust education. Respected institutions such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Yad Vashem suggest extensive guidelines. Scholars have shared, and continue to share, their insights, and conferences on the topic abound. See, for example, *Teaching the Holocaust: Educational Dimensions, Principles and Practice*, ed. Ian Davies (London, United Kingdom: Continuum, 2000); *Testimony, Tensions, and Tikkun: Teaching the Holocaust in Colleges and Universities*, ed. Myrna Goldenberg and Rochelle L. Millen (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2007); and *New Perspectives on the Holocaust: A Guide for Teachers and Scholars*, ed. Rochelle L. Millen (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

6. Beyond the courses discussed in this section, I have used the VHA in the following courses: HIEU 154 (“Germany from Bismarck to Hitler”), HIEU 171 (“Nazism and Stalinism in Comparative Perspective”), and TMC 20 (Thurgood Marshall Honors Seminar: Holocaust Video Testimony”), all taught at University of California, San Diego, and HIST 440 (“Holocaust”) at San Diego State University.

7. The full assignment is available upon request from the author.

8. My own research on video testimony has increasingly led me to believe in the supreme significance of what might be called a “phenomenological” approach to video testimony. For a useful discussion of the phenomenological approach to oral history (which would seem to include video testimony), see R. Kenneth Kirby, “Phenomenology and the Problems of Oral History,” *Oral History Review* 35, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2008): 22-38. I wanted to make sure that students were early on aware of the importance of being attentive to different kinds of information conveyed in the interview.

9. While problematic, the constant blending of March of the Living with interview footage raises interesting questions about the presence of the past and its multiple uses.

10. Tony Kushner, “Holocaust Testimony, Ethics, and the Problem of Representation,” *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 6.

11. Michele Barricelli, Juliane Brauer, and Dorothee Wein, “Zeugen der Shoah: Historisches Lernen mit lebensgeschichtlichen Videointerviews, Das Visual History Archive des Shoah Foundation Institute in der schulischen Bildung,” *Medaon* 5 (2009): 14.

12. Christopher R. (student), “Illumination, not Instruction,” HIEU 158, Spring 2013, University of California, San Diego.

13. Tyng-Guang C. (student), “History, Memory and Testimony,” HIEU 144, Fall 2011, University of California, San Diego.

14. Rebecca H. (student), “Testimonies of Holocaust Witnesses,” HIEU 144, Fall 2011, University of California, San Diego.

15. Andrea N. (student), “Samuel Gesundheit: Trauma of the Holocaust in Video Testimony,” HIEU 158, Spring 2013, University of California, San Diego.

16. Rebecca H.

17. Dane S. (student), “Virtual [*sic*] History Archive: Miriam Merzbacher,” HIEU 158, Spring 2013, University of California, San Diego.

18. Tyng-Guang C.

19. Meredith B. (student), “HIEU 158: VHA Testimony Essay,” HIEU 158, Spring 2013, University of California, San Diego.

20. Henry Greenspan and Sidney Bolkonsky, “When Is an Interview an Interview? Notes from Listening to Holocaust Survivors,” *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 448.

21. Armando C. (student), "HIEU 158 Writing Assignment," HIEU 158, Spring 2013, University of California, San Diego.
22. Ibid.
23. Meredith B.
24. Jihee Y. (student), "The Absence of Emotions in Video Testimonies of the Holocaust," HIEU 158, Spring 2013, University of California, San Diego
25. Ibid.
26. Marsha R. (student), "HIEU 144 Final," HIEU 144, Fall 2011, University of California, San Diego.
27. Laura Hillman, Visual History Archive, seg. 79 (quoted in abbreviated version by Marsha R.).
28. This interpretation begs the question of why a survivor of Auschwitz and other camps would be concerned about sounding depressing. In stressing the individual's ability to overcome even the most harrowing hardship and loss, Hillman may unconsciously be tailoring her testimony to popular obsessions with "heroic survival" and the inevitable "triumph of the human spirit."
29. On teaching a victim-centered perspective of the Holocaust, see Jeffrey C. Blutinger, "Bearing Witness: Teaching the Holocaust from a Victim-Centered Perspective," *The History Teacher* 42, no. 3 (May 2009): 269-279.
30. Kaya Yilmaz, "Historical Empathy and Its Implications for Classroom Practices in Schools," *The History Teacher* 40, no. 3 (May 2007): 331.
31. Ibid., 332.
32. Jeffrey L. (student), "A Better Look at the Past," 3, HIEU 158, Spring 2013, University of California, San Diego. Students were asked to read one of three articles suggested, including Aleida Assmann, "History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony," *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2006).
33. Jeffrey L.
34. Elizabeth G. (student), "Laura Hillman: A Schindler Jew and Holocaust Survivor," HIEU 158, Spring 2013, University of California, San Diego.
35. Armando C.
36. Jeffrey L.
37. Andrea N.
38. Andrea N.
39. Elizabeth G.
40. Dane S.
41. Christopher R.
42. For a good introduction to life stories, see Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
43. Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps, "Narrating the Self," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 25 (1996): 20.
44. This dialectical process explains the malleability of story content and telling over time. "Life stories highlight the context within which individuals develop and through which experiences are understood," write Brian de Vries and Peter Suedfeld, who have studied the life stories of aging Holocaust survivors. "[S]uch stories provide textured, nuanced accounts of life course development, spawning novel interpretations and hypotheses." See de Vries and Suedfeld, "The Life Stories of Holocaust Survivors," *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 60, no. 3 (2005): 184.
45. As Geoffrey Hartman notes in connection with Holocaust video testimony: "A good interview reveals not only the daily life and death in the camps or hiding places; it brings the entire person forward, disclosing, for instance, what was endured during the period of resocialization (the survivor's struggle for normalcy after the Holocaust) and

the continuing effect of the catastrophe on the survivor's descendants." See Hartman, "Audio and Video Testimony and Holocaust Studies," in *Teaching the Representation of the Holocaust*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Irene Kacandes (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2004), 211.

46. As Kushner reminds us, video testimony "if not always used in the form of sound bites, is rarely allowed to have space to reveal its own internal dynamics, especially in relation to the rest of the person's life story." Kushner, "Holocaust Testimony," 292.

47. Irene Kacandes, "'You Who Live Safe in Your Warm Houses': Your Role in the Production of Holocaust Testimony," in *Insiders and Outsiders: Jewish and Gentile Culture in Germany and Austria*, ed. Dagmar C. G. Lorenz and Gabriele Weinberger (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 194. On the creative aspect of listening, also see Lawrence L. Langer, "Hearing the Holocaust," *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 308.

48. Christina C. (student), untitled paper, HIEU 144, Summer 2013, University of California, San Diego.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.

52. Chloe J. (student), "A Unique and Effective Remembering of Experience," HIEU 144, Summer 2013, University of California, San Diego.

53. Ibid.

54. Irene K. (student), "Lorraine Allard," HIEU 144, Summer 2013, University of California, San Diego.

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

57. Tommy U. (student), "A Different Kind of Silence," HIEU 144, Summer 2013, University of California, San Diego.

58. Ibid.

59. Ibid.

60. Mark Klempner, "Navigating Life Review Interviews with Survivors of Trauma," *Oral History Review* 27, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2000): 77 f. Klempner bases his account of these defensive reactions, in this case those of the interviewer, on Laub's findings.

61. Tommy U.

62. Hartmann, "Audio and Video Testimony and Holocaust Studies."

63. On some of the problems associated with the VHA, see Mintz, *Popular Culture and the Shaping of Holocaust Memory*, 180 f.

64. For a critical view of the testimonies contained in the VHA, see Diane Wolf, "Holocaust Testimony: Producing Post-Memory, Producing Identities," in *Sociology Confronts the Holocaust: Memories and Identities in Jewish Diasporas*, ed. Judith M. Gerson and Diane L. Wolf (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007). While I agree with Wolf's fear that the VHA interviews encourage "the creation of a partial and simplistic Jewish post-memory and Jewish identity" and "are choreographed to produce a feel-good Hollywood ending," the approach outlined in this paper mitigates against this danger; Wolf, 155, 174. For a critical view from an interviewee, see the account of survivor Agi Rubin quoted in Greenspan and Bolkonsky, "When Is an Interview an Interview?," 444.

65. Even the tailored IWitness program, I have found to my delight, contains sufficient excellent interviews to choose from.

66. Michael Frisch, as quoted in Steven High, "Telling Stories: A Reflection on Oral History and New Media," *Oral History* 38 (Spring 2010): 101.

67. Shira Magen, "Using Testimony in Holocaust Education," YadVashem.org, <http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/learning_environments/testimony.asp>.

68. For the program “Adopt a Survivor,” see <<http://www.adoptasurvivor.com>>. For the notion of “secondary witnessing,” see, for example, Assmann, “History, Memory, and the Genre of Testimony,” 267 f.

69. James Hatley, *Suffering Witness: The Quandary of Responsibility after the Irreparable* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 111.

70. Joanne Weiner Rudof, “Research Use of Holocaust Testimonies,” *Poetics Today* 27, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 459. Bauer is quoted in Rudof, 460.

71. Armando C.

72. Theodor W. Adorno, “Education After Auschwitz,” in *Can one Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 21. Emphasis added.

Appendix

Interview/Testimony Sources

Interviews analyzed by students quoted in this paper (interviews marked with an asterisk are available for educators at the IWitness website):

Lorraine Allard

Edith Eger

Samuel Gesundheit

Pinchas Gutter*

Laura Hillman*

Morris Liebermensch

Gerhard Maschkowski

Miriam Merzbacher

Ursula Rosenfeld*

Georg Sakheim*

Helen Tichauer

Writing assignments designed for use in upper-division history courses are available upon request from the author.