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Ethical and Methodological Approaches to Holocaust Testimonies

Bridging Oral History and Digital Humanities

Abstract

The aim of this workshop was to convene an interdisciplinary group of Holocaust scholars with expertise in survivor testimony, oral history, and digital humanities to initiate a sustained dialogue between these fields, examining the methodological, ethical, and epistemological questions that arise where they intersect. By fostering cross-disciplinary exchange, the workshop explored how digital tools and platforms can both support and challenge traditional approaches to working with Holocaust testimonies, and how digital humanities can learn from the epistemologies, practices, and critical self-reflection that have long shaped the field of oral history.

The workshop entitled Ethical and Methodological Approaches to Holocaust Testimonies: Bridging Oral History and Digital Humanities was held at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies between 29 June and 2 July 2026. The workshop was initiated, planned, and led by Malin Thor Tureby (Malmö University) and Noah Shenker (Colgate University) and made possible through funding from the Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (Project Dnr F25-0285). As the workshop's initiators and convenors, Thor Tureby and Shenker developed the intellectual framework; assembled a carefully selected group of scholars, archivists, and curators; and chaired the discussions throughout the workshop. The workshop was organised in collaboration with Stephen Naron, director of Yale University's Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, and Éva Kovács, deputy director of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies, whose organisational support contributed significantly to the planning and implementation of the event.

The goal of the organisers was to create a space for interdisciplinary dialogue among Holocaust scholars working with survivor testimonies, oral history, and digital humanities. The workshop provided an opportunity to discuss the methodological, ethical, and epistemological questions emerging at the intersection of these fields and to explore how digital tools and platforms can both support and challenge established approaches to Holocaust testimonies. At the same time, the event aimed to examine how digital

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Participants in the workshop: Albert Lichtblau, Avinoam J. Patt, Todd Presner, Ari Joskowicz, Robert Ehrenreich, Crispin Brooks, Hannah Pollin-Galay, Éva Kovács, Malin Thor Tureby, Renana Keydar, Stephen Naron, and Katinka Mári. Not pictured are Dan Leopard and Monika Vrzgulova, who also participated in the workshop, and Ellen Hallgren, who joined remotely via Zoom to give a presentation.

humanities can benefit from the critical perspectives, practices, and reflexive approaches developed in the field of oral history.

The workshop brought together a carefully selected interdisciplinary group of participants – including researchers, archivists, and curators from a range of institutions and archives working with Holocaust survivor testimonies – identified and invited by the workshop initiators to ensure a productive dialogue across disciplinary, professional, and geographical boundaries. The event was designed to create a space for interdisciplinary dialogue among Holocaust scholars working with survivor testimonies, oral history, and digital humanities, and to foster exchange between researchers and professionals responsible for collecting, preserving, curating, and providing access to testimonial sources. A further objective was to bring European and North American perspectives into conversation with one another, enabling participants to share different experiences, institutional practices, and methodological approaches to Holocaust testimony.

Each participant presented a challenge or problem they were grappling with in their own work, accompanied by a selection of primary and secondary sources central to their research or professional practice. Following each presentation, twenty minutes were dedicated to group discussion, which offered an opportunity for participants to engage critically with the questions raised in the presentation, drawing on their diverse scholarly and institutional experiences.

Following the presentations, participants were divided into smaller groups. Addressing the issues discussed throughout the

workshop, each group worked collaboratively to identify central themes across the presentations, explore conceptual linkages between different projects, and develop analytical frameworks for understanding shared methodological, ethical, and epistemological concerns.

The first speaker, Monika Vrzgulová, director of the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, opened the workshop with a presentation on the ethical issues related to the digitisation and accessibility of Holocaust survivors' oral history interviews. She invited participants to reflect on the ethical challenges involved in making testimonies available through digital archives. Vrzgulová emphasised that the essence of oral history lies not only in the spoken words but also in the personal encounter, emotions, silences, and the relationship of trust between interviewer and interviewee, all of which can easily be marginalised in a digital environment. She also raised questions concerning informed consent, pointing out that those who gave permission for their interviews to be recorded thirty years ago could not have anticipated the possibilities offered by artificial intelligence and digital archives today. Additionally, she opened a discussion on the ethical implications of AI-generated digital duplicates, the risks of Holocaust distortion, and the involvement of survivors and their families in decisions concerning the preservation and dissemination of testimony. Vrzgulová proposed that the digitisation of Holocaust testimonies is not simply a technical process but a fundamentally moral undertaking. She invited participants to reflect on how the ethical principles of oral history should inform digital humanities projects and the use of emerging technologies in testimony archives.

Following this conversation about ethical issues, Crispin Brooks, the curator of the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, initiated an exchange about the practical applications and limitations of artificial intelligence in Holocaust testimony archives. Using examples from the foundation's work, he examined how AI is being incorporated into the transcription and indexing of Holocaust survivor testimonies. He explained that AI offers significant advantages in terms of speed, scalability, and cost, but it still produces errors ranging from minor inaccuracies to misleading hallucinations, especially in multilingual testimonies, those involving dialects, and in recordings with poor audio quality. He also brought into the discussion the foundation's experiments with AI-generated indexing, demonstrating that despite continuous technological improvements and steadily increasing accuracy, the system still produced errors, often failing to understand historical context or apply archival standards consistently. Participants reflected on the foundation's decision to make AI-generated transcripts and indexes publicly available, clearly labeling them as AI-produced and allowing users to report mistakes. The discussion explored whether imperfect AI-generat-

ed metadata is preferable to having no metadata at all, highlighting the ethical and practical challenges of balancing accessibility, accuracy, and limited institutional resources.

Ellen Hallgren, curator at the Swedish Holocaust Museum, presented on the theme of indexing as both a technical and interpretative practice. Using the ongoing project to index more than two hundred Swedish-language Holocaust survivor testimonies in the Visual History Archive as a point of departure, she invited participants to discuss how testimonies are made searchable and how archival descriptions shape access to historical sources. Hallgren explained the indexing process, demonstrating how controlled vocabularies and minute-by-minute subject indexing allow researchers to locate specific events, places, individuals, and experiences within the interviews. She also highlighted efforts to expand the archive's thesaurus by proposing new subject terms, particularly for Swedish locations, refugee camps, and rescue operations that had previously been missing. The discussion subsequently focused on the interpretative dimensions of indexing and the extent to which indexing is influenced by the expertise, interests, and perspectives of those who perform it. More broadly, participants reflected on the methodological challenges posed by survivor testimonies, including the influence of interviewers on survivors' narratives and the tension between preserving testimonies as personal memories and addressing factual inconsistencies.

The fourth speaker on the workshop's first day, Hannah Pollin-Galay, a scholar of East European Jewish culture and professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, initiated a conversation on how different approaches to working with Holocaust testimonies shape historical research and influence the kinds of questions scholars ask. Drawing on examples ranging from oral history interviews to indexed testimonies, transcripts, and AI-assisted search tools, she encouraged participants to reflect on the opportunities and limitations associated with different forms of engagement with testimony collections. Using the study of ecological experiences during the Holocaust as a case in point, the discussion considered how digital tools make it possible to identify patterns and themes across large collections of testimonies while also requiring researchers to balance efficiency with close reading and contextual interpretation. Rather than framing the issue as a choice between traditional and digital methods, the session explored how AI and digital search tools might complement careful engagement with survivors' narratives. Overall, the discussion emphasised that digital technologies expand the scope of Holocaust research while simultaneously requiring scholars to remain critical of the ways these tools shape attention, interpretation, and historical understanding.

In the next presentation, Robert Ehrenreich, Director of Academic Research and Dissemination at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), introduced the challenges of

discovering and connecting Holocaust-related materials across heterogeneous collections including oral testimonies, archival documents, and museum objects. Using the example of mica fragments preserved by women who had worked in the Theresienstadt Glimmerwerke forced labor factory, he encouraged participants to consider how inconsistent cataloguing and keywording practices can make it difficult to locate related materials across institutions. The discussion focused on the potential of AI to identify relevant sources, generate metadata, and connect dispersed collections without replacing historical research itself. At the same time, participants addressed the practical and ethical challenges of implementing AI in museums and archives, including questions of accuracy, institutional responsibility, and scholarly rigor.

Ari Joskowicz, Professor of Modern Jewish, Romani, and European History at Vanderbilt University, initiated a dialogue on how funding has shaped Holocaust testimony and documentation projects from 1945 to the present. Using historical examples, he invited participants to consider how financial structures influence not only institutions but also memory practices and ethical questions. The discussion traced shifts from survivor-centered fundraising to identity-based fundraising and changing models of private and public funding, highlighting differences between Europe and the United States. Particular attention was devoted to the growing role of digital humanities and AI, which raises new concerns regarding data commodification, transparency, consent, and the ownership of testimonies. Following the presentation, the workshop participants discussed who should determine the priorities of historical research and whether current funding models adequately balance the interests of donors, states, researchers, and the communities whose histories are being documented.

Éva Kovács, deputy director of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute, introduced a discussion on the ontological nature of Holocaust testimony. She invited participants to reflect on testimonies not simply as repositories of historical facts, but as unique dialogical sources co-created by interviewer and interviewee. Using examples from Holocaust testimony archives, she highlighted how contemporary digital technologies and AI-driven methods often privilege searchable metadata and fragmented excerpts while overlooking performative context, narrative structure, silences, and the crucial role of the interviewer in shaping testimony. The discussion focused on how the invisibility of the interview process can fundamentally affect the interpretation of testimonies and obscure important historical connections. Participants also considered how emerging ethical frameworks and digital tools might improve access while preserving integrity, relational character, and narrative cohesion of testimonies.

Albert Lichtblau, a historian at the University of Salzburg, presented on the relationship between different forms of survivor testimony. Probing examples from the Austrian Heritage Collec-

tion at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, participants explored the possibilities and challenges of working with questionnaires, interviews, memoirs, and archival materials together. Lichtblau described how written responses are categorised in order to identify broader patterns while also pointing out the ways they are connected to oral testimonies and autobiographical accounts produced by the same individuals. Through examples of survivors' reflections on returning to Austria after the war, the discussion highlighted how different source types reveal distinct emotional experiences and forms of memory that are often not captured through interviews alone. More broadly, participants reflected on the value of combining quantitative approaches with close contextual analysis to avoid reducing complex experiences to isolated statements.

Avinoam Patt, professor of Holocaust studies at New York University, initiated a discussion on the pedagogical and ethical challenges of using digital Holocaust survivor testimonies in contemporary education, particularly in the United States, where Holocaust instruction is increasingly mandated but often insufficiently supported. He encouraged participants to consider the implications of using digital testimonies in educational settings and questioned how such sources are framed for students. The discussion focused on the tendency of digital technologies to encourage the use of short, decontextualised excerpts that reduce the Holocaust to simplified moral lessons about tolerance or empathy. Participants also pondered the question of whether Holocaust education should primarily serve as a tool to combat contemporary antisemitism, noting the need to distinguish between historical and present-day forms of antisemitism. Additional conversation centered on the limited guidance available to many teachers and the growing reliance on online resources. The emphasis of the session was placed on the importance of historical context, critical thinking, and responsible engagement with survivors' narratives.

Todd Presner, a professor at UCLA and a leading scholar working at the intersection of digital humanities and Holocaust studies, introduced a discussion on the opportunities and ethical challenges involved in applying AI to Holocaust testimony and memory studies. He invited participants to consider the distinction between hermeneutical AI, which supports historical interpretation through tasks such as classification, transcription, translation, and retrieval, and generative AI, which produces new content and therefore raises concerns about distortion, simplification, and misinformation. Using examples of AI-generated testimonies, historical avatars, and synthetic images, the discussion examined the risks posed by historically plausible but fabricated narratives that blur the boundary between authentic and artificial sources. Participants also reflected on the importance of provenance, transparency, and maintaining a clear connection between every digital record and the survivor who created it. The

discussion concluded with reflection on whether carefully designed AI systems might eventually contribute to responsible and ethically grounded historical interpretation without compromising the integrity of Holocaust testimony.

The next presentation initiated another discussion centered on the practical and ethical implications of digital humanities methods. Renana Keydar, professor of law and digital humanities at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, invited participants to reflect on how computational methods and generative AI are transforming research and archival practices. Drawing on projects involving the Eichmann trial, the USC Shoah Foundation, and the Yale Fortunoff Archive, she demonstrated how methods such as topic modeling and large language models can reveal patterns across thousands of testimonies while also identifying overlooked or uncommon perspectives. This prompted a discussion about how digital tools can be used not simply to reinforce statistical averages but also to direct researchers toward lesser-known perspectives. Keydar also introduced the Edut 710 archive, which documents testimonies from the 7 October 2023 attacks, and explained how its retrieval-augmented generation (RAG) system ensures that AI-generated responses remain linked to authenticated testimony and archival sources. The broader discussion focused on how authenticity should be understood in the age of generative AI, emphasising transparency, archival verification, and ethical responsibility.

The closing presentation by Dan Leopard introduced analytical cartooning as an arts-based method for exploring Holocaust memory, survivor simulations, and digital technologies. Using visual storytelling as a starting point, he called on participants to discuss alternative ways of conducting and communicating scholarship. Leopard explored the argument that comics can function not only as a popular medium but also as a legitimate form of scholarly inquiry capable of conveying complex theoretical ideas. Adopting a critical perspective on digital humanities, participants reflected on the social, ethical, and environmental implications of emerging technologies rather than solely focusing on their practical applications. Through examples from his own work, Leopard demonstrated how cartoons and graphic narratives can serve both as research tools and as forms of academic presentation. The discussion concluded with reflections on the ethical challenges posed by artificial intelligence and virtual survivor simulations and on the value of visual and humanistic approaches as alternatives and complements to purely technological solutions.

The group discussions that followed the in-depth discussions of sources and challenges participants' presentations brought to the fore focused on several overarching themes that had emerged throughout the workshop. One central topic was the relationship between the *archive of the past* and the *archive of the present*. Participants explored this distinction as a productive heuristic for

thinking about the historical and contemporary value of archives, as well as the ways in which archives are shaped, instrumentalised, and politicised in different historical contexts.

Another recurring theme concerned the broader historical moment in which Holocaust testimony research, oral history, and digital humanities are currently situated. Participants reflected on what many described as an era of multiple and overlapping crises characterised by political polarisation, democratic challenges, rapid technological transformation, and the increasing influence of artificial intelligence. In this context, discussions focused on the role of historians, humanists, educators, archivists, and curators and on the challenges of working within the field of Holocaust studies in a time marked by growing social and political tensions.

The workshop demonstrated that the increasing use of digital technologies and artificial intelligence in Holocaust testimony research requires not only methodological innovation but also continuous ethical reflection. Across the presentations and discussions, a recurring theme was the need to balance accessibility and technological potential with the preservation of testimonies' historical complexity, contextual integrity, and relational character. Rather than viewing digital tools as replacements for established historical practices, participants emphasised their potential as complementary instruments that can support deeper engagement with survivor narratives. At the same time, the workshop underscored that digital approaches to Holocaust testimonies must remain grounded in critical inquiry, transparency, historical contextualisation, and respect for the voices and experiences of survivors.

A particularly significant outcome of the workshop was the establishment of a shared intellectual agenda and a strengthened international network connecting scholars, archivists, and curators from Europe and North America. Participants unanimously expressed a desire to continue exploring the questions and themes that had emerged during the workshop and agreed on the value of maintaining this interdisciplinary and transatlantic dialogue. Plans are therefore underway for a follow-up workshop next year, which will provide an opportunity to deepen these conversations and further develop collaborative approaches to the study, preservation, interpretation, and dissemination of Holocaust survivor testimonies in the digital age.

Katinka Mári is currently pursuing a master's degree in Historical Studies at Central European University. Her master's thesis investigates scientific knowledge production about Roma in Hungary in the interwar period and the Second World War. She earned her BA in German Studies from Eötvös Loránd University (Hungary) in 2023. Her BA thesis examined the historical and literary dimensions of the Roma Holocaust through an analysis of German-language autobiographical accounts by Sinti and Roma Holocaust survivors.

Malin Thor Tureby is professor of history and the head of research in the Department for Society, Culture and Identity at Malmö University in Sweden. Her research is situated at the intersection of Holocaust studies, oral history, and cultural heritage studies. Professor Thor Tureby's current research interests lie in the history of Holocaust survivors' memory work, the archival and digital practices of cultural heritage institutions, and the history and practice of shared authority and ethics within Holocaust studies. She is presently the principal investigator of two research projects funded by the Swedish Research Council (VR): The Ethical Dilemmas of Digitalization: Vulnerability and Holocaust Collections and Memory and Activism: Survivors Remembering, Commemorating and Documenting the Holocaust. Among her publications are "Revisiting Shared Authority", a special issue of *Oral History* (guest editor with Annika Olsson) 52, no. 1 (2024); and "Oral History and the Holocaust," thematic section of *Eastern European Holocaust Studies* (guest editor with Yurii Kaparulin) 2, no. 1 (2024).

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