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Preprint / Preprint

Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Pető, A. (2016). Digitalized Memories of the Holocaust in Hungary in the Visual History Archive. In R. L. Braham, & A. Kovács (Eds.), *The Holocaust in Hungary: 70 years later* (pp. 253-261). Budapest: Central European University Press. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-71893-9>

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Digitalized Memories of the Holocaust in Hungary in the Visual History Archive

Andrea Pető

This chapter is a contribution to a little analyzed aspect of Holocaust scholarship: the intersection of people's tribunals (post–World War II legal institutions), survivor testimonies, and digital accessibility. The aim is to highlight the complexities of memorialization using one case study: the Visual History Archive of the Shoah Foundation at the University of Southern California; and one subject: the experiences of Shoah survivors during the post-1945 trials in Hungary. I am focusing on Jewish survivors in Hungary as agents of commemoration of their own stories.

Among historians there are two foundational assumptions about the retributive court procedures' relation to the Shoah's post–WWII history. One of them is by Bloxham: "Jewish survivors, indeed survivors in general, were incapable of *illuminating the general picture* because of a prosecution strategy that favored documents above fragile memory."¹ Namely, there has been no possibility for Jewish survivors to give a testimony about their experiences until the Eichmann trial. The second assumption concerns the periodization of Holocaust memory, lumping together into one homogeneous time frame the entire period before the Eichmann trial—and in the case of the Soviet-occupied countries, the period until 1989—and arguing that survivors' stories have not been heard throughout this time. In this chapter first I will discuss the specificities of the Hungarian case, followed

¹ David Bloxham, "From Streicher to Sawoniuk: The Holocaust in the Courtroom," in *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. Dan Stone (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 401 (*italics mine*).

by the analysis of a special aspect of Holocaust memorialization based on testimonies of the Visual History Archive.

How is the survival of 140,000 Jews in Hungary connected to the two foundational assumptions of the literature? In a book coauthored with Ildikó Barna, we offered evidence that these two foundational assumptions do not apply in Hungary, where Jewish survivors were able, in part, to realize their interests in the justice system during the postwar era.² We used quantitative research methods to examine the records of the people's courts, which shed light not only on the identity of Jews who became complainants in the trials, but also on their experiences during the trials. We have argued that the experiences of Jews participating in the post-WWII trials as witnesses, judges, lawyers or spectators contributed to the formation of Jewish survivors' identity.³ The research examined 500 out of 22,000 files created by the People's Court of Budapest (1945–49) to identify the participants of this juridical process that has major importance for the construction of the memory of the Shoah.

We are faced with a very complicated matrix here, as far as the memory of the Shoah is concerned: the two foundational assumptions of post-Shoah retributive justice are not applicable to Hungary. To make the analysis of this intersection even more complex, there is the present memory debate in Hungary, which is caught between the “true memories,” told by the survivors and the “true facts” narrated by qualified historians (who are themselves in the midst of a battle among historians). Who is qualified to tell the truth?

Having all these complexities in mind, in this chapter I would like to limit the focus by examining one case study: Jewish participation in the people's tribunals in Budapest. With this my aim is to contribute to the present discussion on the memory of the Holocaust in Hungary, and to draw attention to a particular intersection, that of people's tribunals, testimonies, and the digital. I am using the testimonies of the Visual History Archive as a source to move beyond the cleavages between memories and facts as well as the two foundational assumptions described in the introduction of this chapter, and doing so I will argue for an understanding of the different types of truth constructed by digital storytelling.

² Ildikó Barna and Andrea Pető, *Political Justice in Budapest after World War II* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015).

³ On Jewish lawyers in Hungary, see Andrea Pető, “I Switched Sides’: Lawyers Creating the Memory of Shoah in Budapest,” in *Confronting the Past: European Experiences*, ed. Davor Pauković, Vjeran Pavlaković, and Višeslav Raos (Zagreb: CPI [Centar za politoloska istrazivanja], 2012), 223–35.

The Source: The Visual History Archive

The Visual History Archive (VHA) consists of 52,000 complete, video-recorded testimonies that can be viewed at length at the access points. The interviews are chronological life story interviews; the interviewers were trained beforehand plus they were provided with more or less similar interview guidelines. The interviews are indexed by subject, geographical location and name; and can be searched by sex and language. This is an outstanding collection, which will influence the formation of Holocaust memory for decades or, optimistically, centuries to come.

For this chapter I viewed interviews with survivors who were talking about the immediate postwar trials in Hungary. The goal was to detect and analyze the narrative constructions they used to narrate tabooed and silenced experiences. Since thus far the literature considered that the experiences of Jews participating in trials do not exist, there are no consensual narrative frames available either.

As far as the general criticism regarding the collection is concerned, I partly agree with the comment formulated by Annette Wieviorka, who blames the collection for the “Americanization of the Holocaust,” and claims that the massive collection of interviews resulted in nothing else but myriads of “authentic” witness stories.⁴ However, her views can be criticized both on political and methodological grounds.

The political ground of the first criticism is based on the understanding that the more survivors story collected the more possibility is there to combat antisemitism and racism.⁵ Had the Shoah Foundation not collected these stories, they would have been lost forever. The 800 interviews made with Hungarian survivors will make a difference in the future as far as politics of memory is concerned.

The methodological criticism tackles the question of what we can do with this massive digital archive that has been already created. It would be a mistake to dismiss it as an unprofessionally collected, mass, “Americanized” collection, the way Wieviorka does. Rather, I argue that scholarship should strive to understand the peculiarities of this collection given by its digital

⁴ Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 95–145.

⁵ More on this see: *The Future of Holocaust Memorialisation. Confronting Racism, Anti-Semitism, and Homophobia Through Memory Work*, eds. Andrea Pető, Helga Thorson, (Tom Lantos Institute, Budapest, 2015).

format. Therefore, in this chapter I am interested in the narrative framework used by the survivors: how do they talk about the post-WWII trials in the interviews they gave for the VHA? I was asking this question for the following reason: I was curious about how survivors were narrating an atypical story, namely their own participation in the postwar legal processes.

The VHA's collection is being used for various purposes. First and foremost to give personal authenticity to the canonized Holocaust narrative in secondary-level education.⁶ Also, certain key concepts like antisemitism, or events like *Kristallnacht* are taught via these video testimonies, which in these cases are used as proofs. The trauma stories in the collection have been analyzed from the point of view of how stories of pain, discrimination, and persecution are narrated. However, the testimonies analyzed in this chapter—the stories of revenge and satisfaction—were rarely voiced before due to the taboo surrounding these experiences.

Survivor Narratives of Postwar Trials

In what follows I will analyze how the agency of the survivors is constructed in the VHA testimonies. As far as methodology is concerned, I interpret court trials as social dramas or, as Turner defined them: “units of a harmonic or disharmonic process, arising in conflict situations”⁷ that entail four phases: the breaching of the norm, the crisis, the remediating action, and the reintegration of the disturbed social group.⁸ Thus, I am analyzing these stories, which the survivors narrated as social dramas, as the breaching of the norm, because revenge and the feeling of satisfaction that comes with revenge were tabooed by 1998–2000 when the interviews were made. In other words, I am using social drama as an analytical framework for understanding the survivors' role in the process.

In the survivors' narratives about the trials five factors can be detected, which are actually influencing the construction of memory and influencing the level of agency of the survivors.

⁶ For more on this, see Andrea Pető, “How to Use the Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive for Teaching at the Graduate Level: A Methodological and Theoretical Reflection,” in *Jewish Studies at the CEU, 2009–2011, Vol. VII*, ed. Andras Kovács and Michael Miller (Budapest: CEU Jewish Studies Project, 2013), 205–11.

⁷ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Field, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974), 37.

⁸ Turner, *Dramas*, 38–41.

The first factor is the temporality of the interviews. Those who were interviewed for the Visual History Archive were very young during the postwar trials. They did not serve as witnesses in the trials, but they were participating as members of the audience. Therefore, their stories are influenced by youthful romanticism about survivors who sneak into the courtroom, etc., creating a very specific memory.

The second factor is related to the sampling of the interviewees. Representativity should not be an issue. Due to the demographic characteristics of the surviving Hungarian Jewry large percentage of the survivors interviewed for the project are living in Budapest, and they are mostly intellectuals.⁹ Therefore, the stories I am analyzing in this chapter are not representative but typical stories.

The third factor is the general silence about feelings of satisfaction and happiness experienced when witnessing trials and executions. This is a strictly taboo topic. The post-WWII trials were expected to negotiate and harmonize emotions to form “emotional communities”¹⁰ besides marking what is good/bad/acceptable. The court was a highly ritualized space where the audience was expected to be silent, therefore we can access the emotions constructed during the trials only through the testimonies. Emotions usually escape the attention of historians, as they do not leave any written trace behind. The VHA video testimony collection is unique as it explicitly asks questions about feelings.¹¹

The fourth factor is how the changing frames of collective memory influence the process of narration. The problem of “memory gap” is well known in the Holocaust literature.¹² The interviews were made after 1989 when the thus far dominant antifascist history and history telling frameworks were being questioned; and simultaneously, a separate sphere was opened for giving testimonies to a US-based foundation. The survivors narrated their experiences of the trials in different sites: first in the midst

⁹ For more, see Viktor Karády, *Túlélők és újrakezdők: Fejezetek a magyar zsidóság szociológiájából 1945 után* (Budapest: Múlt és Jövő, 2002).

¹⁰ Barbara Rosenwein, “Worrying about Emotions in History,” *American Historical Review* 107.3 (2002): 842.

¹¹ More on this, see Andrea Pető, “Historicizing Hate: Testimonies and Photos about the Holocaust Trauma during the Hungarian post-WWII Trials,” in *Tapestry of Memory: Evidence and Testimony in Life-Story Narratives*, ed. Nanci Adler and Selma Leydesdorff (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2013), 3–19.

¹² Grünfeld quoted in Ronit Lentin, “Expected to Live: Women Shoah Survivors’ Testimonial Silence,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 23.6 (2001): 691.

of their own families, and later, in 1998 for the recorded interview for the public collection. The recording of the interview meant to keep this particular version of the story for eternity. The interviews for the VHA were all recorded in the homes of the interviewees, in a seemingly private sphere, but this private sphere was not really private. The camera recording the interview opens up the private space into a semi-private public space. The camera represents the audience, as Laub underlined it in his analysis of the Fortunoff collection, the other major video interview collection. The interviewees were waiting for this possibility to be listened to for the past fifty years. For them the interview meant the moment of entry into history as a witness on their own terms. Wiewiorka analyzed whether they were really entering “on their own terms,” asking how the framing of the interview questions could have influenced the way survivors were talking about their experiences. Surely, in the interview guide there was a question about postwar trials, which actually made it possible to tell these stories, but the stories prompted by this question were continuous and uninterrupted narratives. Thus, it is an important finding that these interviewees wanted to be remembered or they want these stories—even the taboo topics—to be remembered. As one of the survivors said: “I have never told this story as I am telling it now.”¹³

The fifth factor is related to the topic of witnessing. The Visual History Archive is a mass collection. Such a massive number of Holocaust testimonies open up space for a new conceptualization of witnessing. Paul Frosh pointed out “the significance of witnessing for contemporary conjunctions between personal experience, shareable knowledge, and public representation.”¹⁴ He also claims, that “mass media witnessing is routinized and depersonalized in a way that is morally enabling because it maintains a ground of ‘indifferent’ civil equivalence among strangers.”¹⁵ Therein lies the power of the VHA collection. The Holocaust stories are becoming routinized and depersonalized through individualization and particularization, and this framework then opens up space for describing

¹³ Visual History Archive (hereafter VHA), Vicsekné Zsuzsa testimony (50208), “Gyeremekeim estimatesje volt (saját megmenekülésének története P. A.) Soha nem meséltem nekik úgy, ahogy most mesélek.” Thanks to Peter Berczi for his assistance.

¹⁴ Paul Frosh, “Telling Presences: Witnessing, Mass Media, and the Imagined Lives of Strangers,” in *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication*, ed. Paul Frosh (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 51.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

taboo topics as well. The camera, as it was argued before, represents the logic of impersonality. Therefore, the argument of Annette Wiewiorka, who criticized the collection exactly for this reason, is very limited and limiting. I am arguing here that this “factory-like” routinized frame of remembrance opens up space for stories of revenge and satisfaction which have been previously tabooed. The survivor’s agency has been constructed via these discussions.

Analysis of the Testimonies

As the sampling is not representative, a quantitative analysis of the revenge or satisfaction stories among the 800 testimonies from Hungary will not provide more information about the narratives. However, a surprisingly large number of stories remains silent about these experiences despite the fact that the interview guide offered space for raising related questions. A typical testimony describes how the interviewee recalls the process of rationalization of what has happened to them during the last years of the war: One was full of revenge as a small kid, [because] they did this to us. Our affluent life had been destroyed. They pinned stars on us. Who did that? The Arrow Cross members. Then the trials came. These comrades, excuse me, these brothers were condemned to death one by one.¹⁶ The stories play an important role in identity construction, as the phrase “we took revenge” was mentioned several times. “It did not have an atmosphere. This was a showdown. Nothing could be done here. There was no possibility to deny.”¹⁷

The borders of collective identity of the surviving Jews, which were based on suffering and persecution, were marked by these stories. Those survivors who were among the audience in the courtroom narrated how seeing the trial itself offered a sense of revenge. In the testimonies they referred to the perpetrators via

¹⁶ VHA, Otto Gyepes testimony (51012), “Az ember tele volt bosszúvágygal, mint kisgyerek, hogy velünk ezt csinálták. Kizökkentettek a megszokott jómódból. Csillagot tűztek ránk. Kik csinálták? Hát a nyilasok. Akkor jöttek a tárgyalások.... Egymás után ítélték el ezeket az elvtársakat, bocsánat testvéreket halálra.”

¹⁷ VHA, Gábor József testimony (51576), “[N]em volt hangulata. Ez egy leszámolás volt. Itt nem lehetett tagadni.”

nicknames or diminutives (“my fellow”¹⁸ “boy”¹⁹) to act out their power over them. During the trials they exercised the power of the gaze while watching those who harmed them and their families. As these courtrooms were full it was easy to get bodily access to the perpetrators. According to the narrations physical violence was also present in the courtroom. I had one good experience when I had the opportunity to kick that Arrow Cross member. It happened when there was a pause, I do not know if it was because of a closed trial or it was just a break, but the guards were taking him, and I went to him and nicely kicked his leg. One of the elderly guards allowed me to kick and after that he said, ‘What are you doing, go away.’ But he let me kick.²⁰

Kicking and spitting were part of these interactions, but mostly shouting was mentioned: “The court room was full. Lots of people were present. Everybody was shouting: ‘Hang them!’”²¹ The narrations are influenced by details and toolkit from other sources. It is irrelevant that they are narrating the events as their own stories as they have been personally present in the courtroom; very often they engage in a secondary narration. Compared to newsreel coverage of executions of high-profile criminals, the stories demonstrate an astonishing similarity.

Conclusion

This chapter aimed to investigate the intersection of people’s courts, testimonies, and the digital in order to contribute to the understanding of the complexities of narrating tabooed stories by the Hungarian survivors.

¹⁸ VHA, Anna Jávör testimony (51859), “a lelkem,” referring to the executed war criminal

¹⁹ VHA, Hajdú Tibor testimony (50918), “Azt kérdezte ettől a fiútól...”

²⁰ VHA, Szegre Erika testimony (51231), “Még egy jó élményem volt, hogy belerúghattam ebbe a nyilasba. Úgy történt, hogy mikor szünet volt, nem tudom, hogy a zárt tárgyalás miatt vagy csak a szünet volt. De a börtönőrök fogták, én meg odamentem és szépen belerúgtam a lábába. Az egyik idősebb börtönőr, aki szépen hagyta, hogy belerúgjak és utána mondta, hogy mit csinál maga és menjen innen. De hagyta, hogy belerúgjak.”

²¹ VHA, Almásy Tibor (27346), “Tele volt a törvényszék. Rengeteg ember volt. Mindenki kiabált: kötelet.”

One of my arguments is that the massive, standardized collection of VHA opened up space for narrating previously silenced and tabooed narratives.

Brooks, following Freud, differentiates between “material truth” and “psychic truth” in psychoanalysis, which is “that truth of mind and emotions that offers a coherent and therapeutic life narrative ... and is not wholly dependent on referential truth or correspondence to a set of facts.”²² I am arguing in this chapter that during giving testimony at the People’s Tribunals, parts of the “material truth” were revealed but without the “psychic truth,” and this contributed to a controversial construction of collective memory. In the testimonies given to the Shoah Foundation just the opposite happened: the “psychic truth” was revealed without the “material truth” being significant at all. Therefore both sources are important in their own ways, while together they are showcasing the complexities of the history of the Holocaust.

Lastly, I would like to return to the opening statements: I argued that the mainstream historical narrative often muted narratives and invisibilized survivors of the Shoah as agents of their own stories. Looking at different sites of communicative memory, like the post-WWII trials or the digitalized visual memory of the trials, reminds us how fragile and permeable the definition of memory is.

²² Peter Brooks, *Troubling Confessions: Speaking Guilt in Law and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 118.