The Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive: U-M's Access to the Holocaust

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In 1994, following the filming of Schindler's List, many survivors of the Nazi Holocaust came forward to offer their stories. Realizing that time was running out to document these personal histories, film director Steven Spielberg established the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation (SVHF).

Within a year, the Foundation undertook the unprecedented task of recruiting volunteers to interview Jewish, homosexual, Jehovah's Witness, and Sinti and Roma survivors as well as political prisoners, survivors of eugenics policies, rescuers and aid providers, liberators and liberation witnesses, and war crimes trials participants. These volunteer interviewers traveled the world, using local production crews eventually to record over 600,000 videotapes in 56 different countries. The finished work has resulted in 52,000 digitized video interviews in 32 different languages, complete with biographical information for each interviewee and subject indexing linked to specific video segments for each interview.

Recording and indexing the interviews were the first two phases of the Foundation's plan. In 2003, when the Foundation completed the first half of indexing, it began the third and final phase: access to the testimonies. But just as the accumulation of so many interviews was unprecedented, so was attempting to provide access to such a massive video archive. The SVHF, therefore, sought out a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, which funded a partnership with Rice University, the University of Southern California, and Yale University to develop methodologies for providing research and instructional use.

In late 2003, the U-M University Library initiated contact with the SVHF with the goal of bringing access to the Video History Archive to the U-M campus. For its part, the SVHF was interested in expanding its base to include a major public university. According to President Doug Greenberg, SVHF decided to partner with U-M because, "Michigan has an unparalleled reputation in the area of digital libraries and digital resources. It is also a place with an unquestioned commitment to the support of research at the highest level and an institution with a remarkable commitment to undergraduate education...."

With the details of the partnership finalized in spring 2004, the University Library's Information Technology Division worked directly with Foundation staff to link the archive via extremely fast, super-high bandwidth Internet II lines to a terabyte of local cache (computer storage).

A U-M Shoah Visual History Archive (SVHA) Project Team and a Faculty Advisory Committee were formed. The Project Team consists of four librarians, a graphic designer, and several School of Information graduate students. The Faculty Advisory Committee initially included a
number of people with interests in Holocaust and Jewish Studies, but was later expanded to include faculty with expertise in languages and education. By early 2005, a U-M portal website, <http://www.lib.umich.edu/help/svha>, had been developed and the archive was introduced to the campus.

**Reaching Out to Researchers**

From the beginning, outreach has been a crucial part of the Shoah Visual History Archive Project. Unlike many of the other electronic resources the University Library offers to the campus community, the SVHA required a greater level of support for implementation. Along with the technical challenges, the project team was conscious of the unique searching aspects of this resource. For example, testimonies in the VHA are described using a controlled vocabulary which includes approximately 30,000 subject and geographic terms. Testimonies are also categorized by the nine experience groups described earlier and include descriptors for names, language of testimony, religious affiliation, place of birth, and many more. Few other full text or image resources can boast such attention to detail or such a rich searching environment. Thus the team decided early on to concentrate its efforts on user support. In this context, support refers to promotion or advertising of the resource as well as instruction.

Initially, the project team recruited five graduate students from the School of Information, whose primary role was to create the appropriate documentation and instruction guides necessary for first-time or inexperienced searchers, along with presentation materials for training sessions. The students then team-taught a group of such sessions aimed at faculty, graduate students, and librarians in late March and early April 2005, just after the archive was formally launched on campus. In this way, the project team was able to develop its outreach tools, while at the same time provide the graduate students with valuable instruction experience.

With the formal launch completed, the project team intends to continue outreach efforts to the U-M campus during the 2005-06 academic year. These efforts will include one-on-one communication with faculty, directed mailings of promotional materials, and scheduled training sessions. The goal is not only to make faculty and graduate students aware of the VHA, but also to support its use in teaching and research. Moreover, through outreach efforts, the team hopes to impart the message that this archive has many uses and will attract not only those users whose research has an obvious connection to the archive’s content, but also those whose work could benefit from the archive, even though its application may not be immediately evident.

Given the broad appeal of the VHA beyond the campus, the project team also intends to publicize the archive to local and regional community groups. The team takes seriously the Shoah Foundation’s mission to disseminate the archive as well as its own institutional commitment to the state of Michigan. As such, it is eager to promote and support use of the archive by individuals or organizations not directly affiliated with
U-M. In addition to campus researchers, it has already been in contact with Holocaust survivors in an effort to make this resource available to them, their families, and the public, and as stated above, plan eventually to reach out to intermediate and high schools.

**Shaping the Curriculum**

At a major institution of higher education such as the University of Michigan, how can what appears to be a "narrow-interest" database shape the curriculum and research activities of students and faculty in a vast array of subjects?

The structure and scope of the SHVA point to its potential applications. With over 52,000 audiovisual interviews in 32 languages accessible online, the impact not only on historians, but also on linguists, film students, and those for whom the interview process is an important research tool, is enormous. When one considers what the nine basic experience groups underwent from 1933-1945, the number of religious, ethnic, national, social, linguistic, geographical, political groups, etc., involved, suggest a myriad of topics for study and research.

The Frankel Center for Judaic Studies is clearly one of the most likely units on campus to integrate the VHA into its curriculum. Recent Center courses that have examined the Holocaust range from the most unambiguous vis-à-vis this topic such as *Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust: Interpretations and Representations, Perspectives on the Holocaust*, and *The Holocaust in Cinema* to broader categories such as *Contact and Conflict: Jewish Experience in Eastern Europe, Modern Jewish History: 1880 to the Present, Politics and Culture of Modern East European Jewry*, and *Jewish Identities in Europe and America from the Enlightenment to the Present*.

Even broader-themed Judaic courses have encompassed some aspect of the Holocaust: *Israeli Culture and Society, Jewish Identities, Jews in American Culture, Modern Jewish Thought*, and *Religious Dimensions of Modern Jewish Literature*.

Beyond Judaic studies, the VHA should impact study and research in the areas of anthropology, education, film and video, Germanic languages and literatures, history, linguistics, political science, psychology, sociology, and women's studies.

More importantly, there are also academic units that seem less obvious candidates to employ the VHA. These include the following wide and varied examples: art and design (art work created by Holocaust victims); economics (Third Reich's confiscation of victims' property as a means of financing war and genocide); engineering (how engineers facilitated Nazi mass murder); law (postwar trials of some of the perpetrators of the Holocaust); medicine (medical experiments conducted by Nazi doctors); music (uses of music in ghettos and concentration and death camps); and public health (spread of disease in ghettos and camps as a deliberate tactic of mass murder).
The Shoah Visual History Archive Project is one the University Library has embraced wholeheartedly. It is an excellent companion to more traditional resources offered in both print and electronic form, as well as to the pioneering Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivor Oral History Archive (<http://holocaust.umd.umich.edu>) developed at the U-M Dearborn campus by Prof. Sid Bolkosky. The project team expects that this extremely rich and informative archive will provide researchers with a uniquely powerful tool for exploring the Holocaust and invites anyone wishing to use the VHA to visit a branch of the U-M University Library. No appointment is necessary. To request an individual or group instruction session, email <svha-help@umich.edu>. Documentation and Frequently Asked Questions are available at the project site <http://www.lib.umich.edu/help/svha>.

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