

Sylvia Asmus

***Just ask!* – Digital interactive interviews with Inge Auerbacher and Kurt Salomon Maier: Opportunities and limitations of a digital culture of remembrance**

Eighty years after the end of the Second World War, educational projects can no longer count on working closely together with Holocaust survivors. Today, only a few individuals can speak first-hand about that time. The project *Just ask!* was therefore very fortunate in being able to work intensively with Inge Auerbacher and Kurt Salomon Maier.¹

The German Exile Archive 1933–1945 at the German National Library, in cooperation with the USC Shoah Foundation, conducted extensive interviews with Inge Auerbacher and Kurt Salomon Maier. These interviews provided the content for digital interactive testimonies that invite visitors to ask questions and receive answers. Over the course of five days, Inge Auerbacher and Kurt Salomon Maier each answered around 900 questions and gave insights into their lives – including their childhoods in Kippenheim in Baden, years of persecution, deportation to the Gurs and Theresienstadt camps, and a new start in the USA.

The exhibition

The *Just ask!* exhibition by the German Exile Archive in Frankfurt am Main embeds these digital testimonies into historical and biographical context. It paves the way for visitors to ask substantive questions in their interaction with the testimonies.

- 1 For more information on the project see: Sylvia Asmus, "Die Zukunft der Erinnerung? Interaktive Zeitzeug*inneninterviews im Deutschen Exilarchiv 1933–1945 der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek," in *Sammlungsforschung im digitalen Zeitalter: Chancen, Herausforderungen und Grenzen*, eds. Katharina Günther and Stefan Alschner (Göttingen, 2024), 129–139; Sylvia Asmus, "Digital Interactive Interviews at the German National Library's German Exile Archive 1933–1945," in *Technology Meets Testimony: Digital Pathways to Holocaust Survivors' Biographies*, eds. Anja Ballis, Florian Duda and Markus Gloe (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien, 2025), 287–297.

Just ask! takes a multi-perspectival approach to a concrete example. It integrates biographical narratives and historical sources to lend immediacy to individual experiences, illuminate the mechanisms of antisemitic exclusion and forced displacement, and explore what it means to arrive in an unknown country of refuge. It uses a range of different media formats and analogue exhibits.

The exhibition revolves around the life stories of Kurt Salomon Maier and Inge Auerbacher. Its prologue features two animated graphic novels about the lives of Jewish families in Kippenheim before, during and after the National Socialist regime. This art-based section provides visual access to the memories and is especially appealing to younger visitors.

The first chapter of the exhibition is dedicated to Kippenheim, the small town in Baden where both Inge Auerbacher and Kurt Salomon Maier were born. Jewish families had settled there since the 17th century, and their shops and commercial activities were an integral part of village life. Numerous photos document the early childhood friendship of Inge and Kurt, and illustrate their family and neighborhood lives in the 1930s. Kippenheim can thereby be experienced as a concrete historical place where Jewish life was part of the community for generations.

The next chapter shows how Jewish residents were successively disenfranchised as of 1933 and how Jewish families attempted unsuccessfully to emigrate. One key exhibit contains photos of the Maier family's deportation on 22 October 1940 to the Gurs internment camp in southern France. An interactive media station allows visitors to analyze the photos, identify individuals in them and put scenes into context.² No photographs exist of the Auerbacher family's deportation to Theresienstadt in 1942. Instead, a film segment from 1941 shows Jews being deported from Stuttgart, among them Inge's grandmother Betty Lauchheimer who was later murdered in Riga. Another media station enables detailed examination of this film documentation.³

2 See the interview with Christoph Kreutzmüller in the video series *Spurensuche Gurs* ("Searching for Traces of Gurs") by The Blue House in Breisach, installment 10, 7 April 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6jw8ExoDRA> (accessed 24 June 2025).

3 Cf. Tobias Ebbrecht, "Filmen für die Nachwelt: Archibilder von der Deportation jüdischer Bürger aus dem deutschen Reich in den Jahren 1941 und 1942," *Memento Movie: Materialien zum audiovisuellen Kulturerbe*, 24 January 2013: <https://www.memento-movie.de/2013/01/filmen-fur-die-nachwelt/> (accessed 24 June 2025); Tobias Ebbrecht, "'Für die Kriegszeit bezeichnende Vorgänge': Zwei Filme über die Ausgrenzung und Deportation der Juden in Stuttgart 1941," *Filmblatt* 44 (winter 2010–11), 54–67; Günter Riederer, "Maskeraden der Gewalt: Der Film über die

One entire chapter looks at the camps in Gurs and Theresienstadt, with documents, photos and a research station. Inge Auerbacher and Kurt Salomon Maier are heard describing their experiences in this open space.

The exhibition then traces the paths of emigration. After intensive efforts, the Maier family managed to emigrate from Gurs to the USA. The Auerbacher family did so only after the liberation of Theresienstadt and an interim station in Jebenhausen. An interactive station highlights individual migration routes and some of the bureaucratic hurdles.

The last chronological chapter explores the new start in the USA. An interactive analogue media station examines some of the challenges, resources and hopes in how Inge Auerbacher and Kurt Maier ultimately mastered their transition to a new country.

The chronology is interspersed in targeted form with displays of the two eyewitnesses, which underscore their role as influential public voices in a culture of remembrance. Both Auerbacher and Maier began describing their experiences early on and have done so regularly ever since, by giving talks at schools, appearing in documentaries and taking part in memorial events which in Auerbacher's case included giving a speech at the German Bundestag in 2022.

The interactive testimonies

This long-standing involvement as witnesses laid the groundwork for the videographed interviews they each gave over the course of five days, which form the heart of the exhibition. Two additional chapters prepare visitors for their interaction with the eyewitnesses. A digital memory wall provides immersive access to the biographies: the act of reaching for images projected onto the wall launches animated sequences from the lives of the two witnesses. Each sequence concludes with a content-related question for the interviewees. Visitors can collect these questions and use them for reference in the interactive audiovisual session.

The final chapter explores the theoretical, methodological and technical foundations of digital oral history. Videos show how the interviews were conceived and conducted, with Kurt Salomon Maier in 2021 Washington, D.C. and Inge Auerbacher in 2022 in New York

Deportation der jüdischen Bevölkerung in Stuttgart 1941," *Archiv0711*, 2 December 2021: <https://doi.org/10.58079/benu> (accessed 24 June 2025).

City. During the preparatory phase, the interviewees decided on their appearance and the design of the setting. They chose an armchair, their apparel, and a specific seated position to which they returned after each question to enable smooth transitions between clips in the interactive presentation.

The aim of this format is to show the witnesses not just as “heads on a screen” but as entire personalities with their own unique body language, gestures and facial expressions. In contrast to analogue interviews, the format was designed for interactive use from the start. The answers are not played chronologically, but in response to visitors’ questions. Maier’s and Auerbacher’s statements are not altered in any way, in marked contrast to fictionalized formats or AI-generated content. When the five-day interview period was completed, all the video material was transferred to a database and divided into defined answer sequences.

The technology

Visitors use a language-based input system to interact with the digital testimonies. Each question they ask is converted into text data by a speech recognition system and compared with database content. A natural-language processing system applies specific analysis criteria to match the question with an answer. Developed by the USC Shoah Foundation, the technology for this process is known as *Dimensions in Testimony*SM. As an adaptive system, it improves with every interaction it goes through.

Prepared by the exhibition content thus far, visitors then have the chance to interact directly with the digital testimonies. This is done in a darkened room designed for groups, and particularly for school classes. The interviewees appear on high-resolution monitors at eye level. Visitors approach a microphone and direct their questions to the digital images of Inge Auerbacher and Kurt Salomon Maier.

The answers are played immediately, which creates the impression of a dialogue and evokes the sense of an actual experience. However, the time lapse involved in the interaction is clearly communicated: the witnesses’ answers have been recorded in advance and therefore cannot refer to current social or political events.

This *vergangene Gegenwart*⁴ or “present in the past” raises questions of whether and to what extent the intensity of the connection between the visitors and the digital testimonies will diminish over time. It should also be emphasized that interacting with digital witnesses is not the same as talking with people in real life. The digital images are unable to ask questions for clarification, or to modify or expand on their responses. This limitation, however, is also a major strength of the format. It draws attention to the authenticity and constancy of the statements and makes it clear that this form of witnessing is documented – as opposed fictionalized or retroactively edited.

The German Exile Archive holds regular workshops on the interactive interview situation, led by an educational specialist. An integral part of these workshops consists of shared reflection on not only the biographical content and historical contextualization but also technical, ethical and educational matters. Topics include the underlying AI technology, possible forms of a digital culture of remembrance, concepts of witnessing, and opportunities and limitations for the teaching of history in digital spaces.

The *Just ask!* project is undergoing evaluation at the Exile Archive. Results thus far confirm the effectiveness of the format, with an overwhelming majority of visitors reporting that the interactive encounter increases their knowledge and fosters emotional engagement. In response to high demand, an online version of the interviews⁵ and a virtual exhibition⁶ have been developed to allow remote access from any location.

Conclusion

The *Just ask!* exhibition and the digital interactive testimonies create an innovative space for the teaching of history and political science, which combines and integrates technological, remembrance-cultural and educational elements.

4 Habbo Knoch, “Grenzen der Immersion: Die Erinnerung an den Holocaust und das Zeitalter der Digitalität,” in *Jahrbuch für Politik und Geschichte* volume 7 (2016–2019), *Virtuelle Erinnerungskulturen*, eds. Claudia Fröhlich and Harald Schmid (Stuttgart: 2016), 15–44, here 35.

5 <https://fragnach.org/en/wie-kann-ich-das-interview-online-nutzen> (accessed 24 June 2025).

6 <https://ausstellungen.deutsche-digitale-bibliothek.de/frag-nach/> (accessed 24 June 2025).

The heart of the *Just ask!* project was its close collaboration with eyewitnesses Kurt Salomon Maier and Inge Auerbacher. Their participation in both the conception and the implementation not only ensured the authenticity of the presentation, but also guaranteed that they themselves retain authority over the representation of their own biographies.

And finally, the project shows that despite their technical reproducibility, digital testimonies do have limitations – and precisely therein derive their special quality. They open a door to individual acts of witnessing, which, while not able to fully recreate the past, do enable it to be experienced.

Sylvia Asmus, Dr. phil., studied German language & literature and library science in Frankfurt/Main and Berlin, doctorate in Berlin. Director of the German Exile Archive 1933–1945 at the German National Library since 2011. Vice chair of the Gesellschaft für Exilforschung e.V. (Society for Exile Studies) and steering committee member of the international Joseph Roth Society. Numerous exhibitions and publications on exile-related topics, including *Just ask! Digital interactive interviews with Inge Auerbacher and Kurt S. Maier*, together with Theresia Biehl, 2023.