

Anika Reichwald in conversation with
Angela Jannelli and Ulla-Britta Vollhardt

End of Testimony? Museums as sites of remembrance and education

Together with the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp Memorial and the Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future (EVZ), the Jewish Museum Hohenems in the Austrian state of Vorarlberg developed a traveling exhibition in 2018/2019 entitled *End of Testimony?*¹ The exhibition raises awareness for how Holocaust survivor interviews are made, how they are used today and how we might proceed with them in the future when the era of witnesses has passed. It considers both past and future media in which the testimonies are embedded, and thereby also implicitly addresses the dated quality of analogue media.

The exhibition's overall concept allows its content to be adapted to the locations where it is shown. Each site has the chance to (re-)examine its collections, display its institution's access to and treatment of survivors' testimonies, or reflect on specific aspects of the topic in general.

Stations have included the Munich Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism in 2021 and the Historical Museum Frankfurt in 2024/25. In Frankfurt the focus was on how the interviews could be preserved and made accessible over the long term. In Munich the exhibition explored current means of setting survivor interviews in digital spaces. It examined the associated prospects as well as challenges – considerations that also underlie the Potsdam-based project *For real? Virtual encounters with Holocaust survivors*.

Anika Reichwald, Jewish Museum Berlin (AR): A small collection of interviews from the USC Shoah Foundation prompted the Jewish Museum Hohenems to take a closer look at the creation, preservation and use of contemporary witness interviews. As part of the exhibition – developed together with the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp Memorial – the museum showed this collection from the USC Shoah

1 See: https://www.jm-hohenems.at/en/exhibitions/past_exhibitions/end-of-testimony and the associated publication *Ende der Zeitzeugenschaft? Über den Umgang mit Zeugnissen von Überlebenden der NS-Verfolgung* (2024).

Foundation to its visitors for the first time. Around 15 interviews with a biographical connection to Vorarlberg were grouped into relevant categories such as flight, survival under a false identity and life as a displaced person in Vorarlberg. We also wanted to reveal and reflect on how we treat and use interviews with survivors, including the fact that we as a museum also curate these testimonies. A related question was that of who will have the authority to interpret these testimonies in the future when the contemporary witnesses themselves can no longer provide corrections.

Ulla-Britta Vollhardt, Munich Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism (UBV): The Munich Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism was founded relatively recently – it opened in 2015 – and does not have a significant collection of survivor interviews. That was one of the reasons to focus on the future of contemporary witness accounts when we adapted the exhibition to our context in Munich. Moreover, the exhibition coincided with two technologically ambitious Munich-related projects that were testing new ways of presenting contemporary witness reports. One was the interactive digital testimony of the Holocaust survivor Abba Noar developed by the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München (LMU Munich) and the Leibniz Supercomputing Center of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities in a project called *LediZ – Lernen mit digitalen Zeugnissen* (and its parallel English project *LeDiT – Learning with Digital Testimonies*).² The second was a virtual-reality experience entitled *Ernst Grube – The Legacy* developed by the Fraunhofer Heinrich-Hertz Institute (HHI) and UFA GmbH.³ Ernst Grube is a Holocaust survivor who was born in Munich in 1932 and has close relations with our museum. We integrated these two applications – while still in their development stages – into our exhibition. While it was running, the developers were testing their applications with school classes and in seminars, evaluating them and doing further research. Our goal was for visitors to experience the new formats in practice and to discuss them. Ideally they would reflect on how we want to treat the legacy of the survivors. This prompted lively discussions on the possibilities and limitations of “digital testimonies”, and also on the relevance of first-hand reports in education and outreach in general.

2 <https://www.en.lediz.uni-muenchen.de/projekt-lediz/index.html> (accessed 13 July 2025).

3 <https://www.hhi.fraunhofer.de/en/virtual-reality-experience-ernst-grube-the-legacy.html> (accessed 26 June 2025).

Angela Jannelli, Historical Museum Frankfurt (AJ): At the Historical Museum Frankfurt we linked the exhibition with two existing projects. One is the “Library of Generations”, an artistic memory project.⁴ The other is the “CityLab” participatory exhibition format.⁵ This gave rise to the “Memory Lab”, in which 25 participants developed eleven contributions to the exhibition. Its starting question was: “What do yesterday’s memories tell us today?”

The *End of Testimony?* traveling exhibition also prompted us to watch recorded interviews with local contemporary witnesses. We worked with Frankfurt-based initiatives that have been interviewing Holocaust survivors since the 1980s. On realizing that a lot of material had not yet been made accessible or digitized, we decided to add a digitization workshop to the exhibition in order to preserve these narratives, as the storage media were becoming outdated.

AR: In adapting the exhibition for your institutions in Munich and Frankfurt, you both therefore examined a key facet of survivors’ testimonies, namely their technical dimensions and how these have undergone fundamental changes since the 1940s. Numerous institutions with different profiles are facing similar questions: how can they preserve their collections, present them and keep them accessible in the future?

AJ: One thing I’d like to see in Frankfurt is an archive or municipal media system that stores and preserves oral history for the long term, and that enables access to both the content and the sources themselves.

UBV: The history of contemporary witness reports can also be read as a history of the media they are presented in. Viewed from that perspective, you realize that survivors’ testimonies and how they are conveyed are always a product of their time, and that each age and generation develops its own ways of doing that. Like the culture of remembrance itself, how we engage with testimonies of contemporary witnesses reflects our own society, which is constantly changing not only culturally but also technologically. But here we need to keep an eye on what is reasonable, responsible and ethically acceptable, and where the misuse of contemporary witness reports sets in.

4 <https://www.historisches-museum-frankfurt.de/de/bibliothek-der-generatio-nen?language=en> (accessed 23 June).

5 <https://www.historisches-museum-frankfurt.de/de/stadtlabor?language=en> (ac-cessed 13 July 2025).

As artificial intelligence continues to advance we can see in the political sphere, for instance, how statements are falsified, altered and instrumentalized. Yet at the same time, AI brings very beneficial opportunities to working with testimonies, such as the ability to compile and process huge amounts of interview material.

AR: Museums and other institutions should therefore devote attention to how media have been changing. Sharpening awareness that these interviews are actually “made” can help us understand the new types of media arising now in the digital transformation. Yet the question remains: how do we find forms of outreach that generate awareness for narrated memories in audiovisual media, while also helping target groups see that these media might possibly be manipulated?

AJ: We as institutions that deal with history and memory can play an important role here. We can provide space and occasions for addressing these questions. One of the participants in our Memory Lab, for example, looked at the opportunities and ethical limits for artificial intelligence in processes of remembrance. Her contribution to the exhibition highlighted the very helpful ways AI can transcribe old types of handwriting, yet also noted the risks of deep fakes. I think memory-related institutions should strive to be as transparent as possible in their work with sources, quite simply in order not to lose credibility.

AR: The future of contemporary witness accounts, therefore, requires us to scrutinize our role as sites of remembrance, but also as institutions of learning – especially when contemporary witnesses can no longer exercise narrative authority. What happens when the narrators themselves are no longer the focus but only their narratives, in whatever format? How are you addressing this transformation at your institutions – which have different respective societal functions – also with an eye to different formats, be they exhibition-based, digital or educational?

In short, what is your take on the future of contemporary witness accounts?

UBV: We should start by noting that historical-political education about National Socialism and the history of violence in the 20th century does not stand or fall with the physical existence of contemporary witnesses, given the wealth of existing audiovisual survivor testimonies. What will end is the chance for personal encounters with survivors – and the voices they raise. That dimension definitely affects society as a whole. Over the past decades, these witnesses have become something like moral authorities in political and social life. We as a whole now have to take on that role and stand up for what the

survivors have represented: a solidarity-based society above and beyond specific ethnicities, political persuasions and religions. Keeping this legacy alive is closely connected with the future of contemporary witness accounts – and the future of our democracy.

AJ: Participants in our Memory Lab have taken on this task and created a type of solidarity-based memory collective for the exhibition. The topics they selected, however, were not from the historical past but instead were related to the present and the realities of their own lives. Examples included stories of migration and movement, of AIDS activism in the 1980s or queer/lesbian history. When we examine how testimonies are performed and produced, we definitely see similarities to the interview settings of the Holocaust survivors. That makes me wonder whether, by remembering the Holocaust, we have been learning “cultural techniques of witnessing” that can be adapted and applied to other historical narratives.

AR: But that also raises the question of whether we should be drawing these analogies as an educational approach. In my opinion, what we’re seeing here is a gap between the protagonists and their narratives on the one hand, and the society for which the survivors are actually a constant projection screen. Listeners and viewers are part of the multidimensional phenomenon of witnessing. So are we as institutions that shape society, precisely because our task of collecting and preserving means that we are passing on the narratives of the survivors. Critical examination of narrated memories then also has to include reflecting on removing the interviews from their original context, for example, and placing them into contexts where they fit our respective stories and narratives.

AJ: I think it would be very helpful to distinguish more clearly between the eyewitnesses themselves with their very personal and immediate experiences, and the act of being a witness. To be a witness is something we can make our own. It means taking seriously the appeals made by many of the Holocaust survivors – and therefore to actively oppose discrimination, marginalization and injustice, and to promote a peaceful, free and just society.

For us in Frankfurt the exhibition project was also an occasion to consider contemporary witness interviews in the history of our museum. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Historical Museum was one of the first to integrate oral history into its exhibitions. How have we dealt with contemporary witnesses, interviews, reports and individual stories in the past? How do we want to do so today? And how can we ensure that the stories will not stop when the tellers are no longer present?

AR: To continue that thought, for me the future of contemporary witness accounts will be connected above all with studying the interviews we already have. We need to keep inventorying and opening up our existing collections, and analyzing them in new ways – with new questions and from different perspectives.

UBV: Working with survivors' testimonies of the Shoah – including the second and third generations – will always be relevant for institutions like ours. After all, the stories reveal the individuals and their experiences behind the historical facts; they facilitate emotional engagement with the topics, promote empathy and encourage us to reflect on our own positions. As institutions that convey knowledge, and ultimately also values, we must not remain focused on the past but should also show how it extends into the present and will mark the future. We need to take a stand in the present, keep an eye on the future and be open to new developments – without neglecting our critical faculties. Moreover, we have to learn how to handle multiple interpretations and different opinions and perspectives without refusing to talk with each other. That is our job, which the survivors have reiterated time and again.

AJ: One of the Memory Lab participants went straight to the heart of the matter. She said, "Bearing witness is the smallest form of activism." That puts it really well, I think.

UBV: Or, in the words of the survivor Ernst Grube: "Remembering is not enough on its own."

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Angela Jannelli, Dr. phil., German & Romance literature scholar and cultural anthropologist, studied in Tübingen, Aix-en-Provence and Hamburg, doctorate from the University of Hamburg on amateur museums. Since 2010 curator for participative museum work at the Historical Museum Frankfurt. Co-developer of the CityLab exhibition format, director of the Library of Generations art-based remembrance project. Continuous focus on participation and remembrance culture in a diverse society.

Ulla-Britta Vollhardt, Dr. phil., historian, studied modern and contemporary history, history education and modern German literature in Munich, doctorate from the LMU Munich. Independent research and public history projects, since 2010 curator at the Munich Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism (nsdoku). Exhibitions and publications on e.g. historical and remembrance-political topics, queer history, right-wing extremism and Nazi persecution.