**A Museological Approach to Collecting Oral Histories: A Case Study of the Holocaust Collections at the Imperial War Museum**

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**Introduction**

The Sound Archive at the UK’s Imperial War Museum (IWM)—formerly known as the Department of Sound Records—has to date amassed some 33,000 sound recordings, including almost 1,000 interviews conducted with survivors of or witnesses to the Holocaust. It is a noteworthy collection not least for the innate and indisputable value of the narratives contained within these testimonies, but also because, as it stands, it is the largest collection of Holocaust oral history material in the United Kingdom.

There was nothing inevitable about the decision to collect Holocaust material at the IWM, however: the material gradually found its way into the archive as the museum slowly changed its remit to reflect the demands of the society that serves it and that it, in turn, serves. Despite actively collecting material on World War II before the conflict itself had ended, at the time of the establishment of the Sound Archive, the IWM was little concerned with the genocide of the Jews. Today, the IWM describes itself as “a global authority on conflict and its impact, from the First World War to the present day, in Britain, its former Empire and Commonwealth,”[[1]](#footnote-1) and that such a museum should contain any significant quantity of material relating to the Holocaust is perhaps a curious thing; it is only the presence of the internationally renowned national Holocaust Exhibition, which opened in 2000 at the Imperial War Museum London that prevents its archival holdings of Holocaust material from seeming incongruous with its vision. As a cultural institution, and as Britain’s national war museum, the IWM reflects Britain’s wider engagement with the collective memory of war and its emerging discourses. The IWM is thus not only a repository of information about the genocide of the Jews that occurred in Europe during World War II, but the shifting attitudes and approaches that enabled the genocide to be incorporated into the museum’s remit exemplify British national engagement with the Holocaust over time.

In 2001, Tony Kushner published an article in *Oral History* in which he examined how museums such as the IWM engage with Holocaust testimony in their work. Kushner’s analysis is a sound exploration of the IWM’s operational framework and how its changing understanding of its own responsibilities facilitated the inclusion of the Holocaust within its remit.[[2]](#footnote-2) This article builds on Kushner’s work on the IWM and follows an analytical precedent set by Noah Shenker, whose analysis of Holocaust oral history collections in the United States explores the formative impact of institutional practices on the content of Holocaust testimonies and testimony collections. Shenker argues that “analysis presents the challenge of addressing the media specificities of testimonies—of examining them not as raw sources but as processes mediated by the encounter between witnesses and the interviewers and technologies employed by an archive. These include the roles of institutional protocols…that impact the production and reception of testimony.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

This article explores how, by involving themselves in oral history, museums produce a particular kind of oral history designed to serve specific, institutionally determined ends, which feeds into a wider conversation about the mediating effect of the perceived “audience” of oral history. The intention of this exploration is twofold. First, I will examine the extent to which the institutional mandate of the IWM has shaped its Holocaust oral history holdings as a curated collection of material, departing from the principle outlined by Bhaskar Sarkar and Janet Walker that “an archive is no mere aggregation of documents: it is driven by its internal logics of selection, classification and organization, orchestrated to produce a single and cogent corpus.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Second, using examples taken from interviews in the collection, I will identify some of the ways in which the operational frameworks of the IWM, which functions simultaneously as both an historical archive and a public-serving cultural institution, bear an influence on the nature of individual testimonies contained within the archive, particularly in terms of content, but also in terms of style and form. By analyzing these Holocaust oral histories against the methodological practices and cultural impulses that have governed their production, I will demonstrate how we are able to inform our understanding of archived Holocaust testimonies as contextually contingent interactions with the Holocaust and with Holocaust survivor memory and, moreover how the contextually specific nature of the museum’s approaches to collecting oral histories with Holocaust survivors renders the collection a cultural response to the Holocaust in its own right.

First, it is worthy to note that the analysis that follows is limited by what is possible in the space available; the museological influences discussed herein do not and cannot represent the extent of the influences that act upon an interview. It is not possible within the scope of this article to undertake a full contextual analysis of Holocaust survivor testimonies that can meaningfully explore and account for the multitude of mitigating factors that are at play, not least because of the volatile and often unpredictable nature of traumatic memories. As Noah Shenker articulates:

While certain infrastructures serve to advance a particular archive’s representational and institutional cultures and aims, the spontaneous and fragmentary dimensions of personal memory are not always easily integrated with or subordinated to those preferences…the traumatic registers of memories often disrupt or transcend archival attempts to contain and instrumentalize the stories of the Holocaust.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Henry Greenspan likewise acknowledges the conflict that sometimes arises when survivors consciously or unconsciously seek to subvert or challenge the expectations and agendas that confront them in the situations in which they give their testimonies.[[6]](#footnote-6) Yet the reality is that in preserving these memories—for posterity, for education, for transmission to future generations—these narratives are by necessity brought into being through a series of administrative, technical, and theoretical processes that are an integral part of the production of oral history. It is the impact of these processes of selection, collection, and curation as they operate within the Imperial War Museum Sound Archive that is under scrutiny in this paper.

**The Department of Sound Records**

In March 1972 David Lance, oral historian and keeper of sound records at the IWM, sent a memorandum to the deputy director of the Imperial War Museum London putting forward an argument for the establishment of a Department of Sound Records within the IWM’s historical archives. “The justification for tape recording personal reminiscences” Lance wrote, “[is] that it provides a record where none would otherwise exist.” Lance was keenly aware of the inherent class biases of written documentation and was eager to harness one of the key strengths of the oral history method to expand the museum’s archival holdings: its ability to obtain historical evidence documenting the experiences of “men and women, at all levels and from all walks of life.” To achieve its aims, Lance indicated that the department would simultaneously endeavor to obtain copies of extant sound material from other archives and embark upon an interviewing program of its own. Thus, through the archive’s collection policy, the curatorial influence of David Lance and his staff shaped the contents of the Sound Archive in two ways: by the active creation of new material on relevant subjects and via the selective inclusion of other people’s material.[[7]](#footnote-7) The archive was formally established later that year, with David Lance as its first keeper.

Lance was acutely aware of the ways in which the needs and function of the collecting institution circumscribes the collecting policies of its archives and, in the case of sound archives specifically, mandates their approaches toward conducting their own oral histories. Far from being ahistorical, unbiased repositories of information, Lance observed that “archives are established usually for quite specific functions that are defined by their founding authorities… [F]or example, a research institute serving its own scholarly staff and an exclusively academic community will have different objectives from a museum, which has more general educational goals.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In a paper presented at the conference of the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA) in 1983, Lance turned his attention to the ways in which the institutional mandate of the museum distinguished museological approaches to oral history from academic ones. Whereas a research institute with an academic staff and clientele is most likely to focus its recording efforts on obtaining specific information in pursuit of particular research agendas, a museum is an institution dedicated to the preservation of historical material, usually with a concurrent commitment to making that material available for researchers and for educational purposes. The historical material that it would preserve would be determined by the topical remit and cultural responsibilities of the collecting museum.

Despite proposing that the department conduct interviews with a wide range of individuals “whose experiences are of relevance to the field of war in the 20th century,”[[9]](#footnote-9) the Holocaust was almost entirely absent from the interviews conducted by the archive in its first decade of operations. From the beginning, the museum had exercised a commitment to ensuring that its collections represented not an impersonal nationalistic view of the war, but the experiences of the individual; Sir Martin Conway, the first director general of the IWM, stated that the “large mass of official exhibitions…will be a dead accumulation unless it is vitalised by contributions expressive of the action, the experiences, the valour and the endurance of individuals.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The absence of any significant or meaningful engagement with the Holocaust by the museum in the 1950s and 1960s is the result of two key components of the museum’s self-defined remit. The first is both a historical and a historiographical factor: though now we quite clearly conceive of “the Holocaust” as an historical event in its own right, it was not until the 1960s that engaged discussion about the destruction of European Jewry commenced and “the Holocaust” was conceptualized as a singular event that was integral to, but nonetheless identifiable within the wider experience of World War II.[[11]](#footnote-11) Prior to this, historical discourse did not distinguish one from the other—that is, if it spoke about the Holocaust at all. Margaret Brooks summarized the second factor quite succinctly when asked why the early recording efforts of the Sound Archive neglected to include the experiences of Holocaust survivors. Put simply, they “lacked the British context which the Imperial War Museum at that stage in its development saw as fundamental to its core focus.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

The influence of both these factors—Lance’s understanding of the purpose of museum sound archive oral history and the boundaries of the IWM’s vision and remit—are apparent in the recording priorities for the department, outlined by Lance in his proposal. First, following preparatory research, the department would conduct interviews on the subject of World War I before the passing of witnesses led to the irretrievable loss of personal reminiscences. Second, they would record the stories of “outstanding figures in the Museum’s field who are of national and international importance.” Third, they would conduct interviews in an effort to fill in the gaps in the museum’s record of the interwar period. Finally, the department would turn its attention to cover all of World War II chronologically.[[13]](#footnote-13) Lance’s methodological approach was project based: a project plan would be written to include an outline of what prospective interviews were to cover; the outline would then serve as an aide-memoire for the interviewer who would conduct the interview following its guidance. All staff members in the department would focus their efforts on seeing the project through to completion before commencing the next. Given that the genocide of the Jews was not considered under the remit of “World War II” insofar as the IWM was concerned with it, it is clear that when Lance made his proposition he had no intention of extending his interviewing program to incorporate the memories of Holocaust survivors.

**Thames Television**

The lack of interest in or understanding of the significance of the Holocaust shown by the Sound Archive is not to say that no material on the topic was collected at this time, however. Lance’s proposal for the department indicated that from the outset, the archive’s own program of interviewing was to be accompanied by efforts to acquire copies of sound material held in other inaccessible archives in order to make their contents available to the public.[[14]](#footnote-14) One such deposit is the material produced by the Thames Television production company, which consists of some 400 interviews conducted in the process of creating the acclaimed TV series *The World at War* and remains the most significant external contribution of Holocaust-related material to the archive to date. The 26-episode documentary series, which explores the history of World War II “from background to legacy, and from the freezing waters of the North Atlantic through the sands of the Western Desert to the jungle of Burma,”[[15]](#footnote-15) was produced by Jeremy Isaacs beginning in May 1971 and was first broadcast on ITV in October 1973.[[16]](#footnote-16) In 1971, the IWM was brought on board as a principle collaborator for the *W* project, with the IWM’s director, Noble Frankland, acting as historical advisor. In return for their assistance, it was agreed that the original interview footage created for the program would be deposited in the IWM archives upon completion of the project. Thus, Jeremy Isaacs claimed that the interviews were shot “from the outset, for [both] the series and for the record.”[[17]](#footnote-17) The IWM holds copies of all the interviews that were conducted for the documentary, which sought interview material that would capture “the voices of those who fought, worked or watched during the Second World War [to give] each televised episode a sense of what it was like to be there.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The interviewing project therefore spanned the thematic and temporal scope of the documentary series and involved individuals whose collective experiences represent a wide range of perspectives on the war. In the case of the Holocaust, these perspectives include those of Jewish refugees, camp and ghetto survivors, German gentile civilians, and prisoners of war, as well as members of the Nazi SS.

This was not a documentary about the Holocaust per se, but by dedicating a whole episode to exploring the subject—episode twenty, “Genocide”— *The World at War* made an unequivocal statement about the significance of the genocide of the Jews as an integral part of the wider World War II narrative. This is critical to note for two reasons. At a time when the genocide of the Jews was not considered of sufficient concern to the British war story to be covered in the historical archives at the IWM, the agreement between Thames Televisionand the IWM resulted in the deposit of a substantial quantity of Holocaust oral history material into the archives of a museum that had yet to develop any serious interest in the subject. It is difficult to determine the exact number of interviews in the collection that reference the Holocaust; still, although this material was collected for only one episode, comparatively the Holocaust was one of the most prolific sources of interview material for the entire series.[[19]](#footnote-19) Moreover, it is within this context that these interviews were conceptualized and framed: these were not life history interviews or opportunities for survivors or witnesses to give testimony; rather, they represent, first and foremost, an effort to elicit useable video material that could illustrate and embellish the broader historical narrative of the series as a whole. The interviews negotiate this ulterior motive with the understanding that the recordings were always intended to be archived at the IWM by following a generally chronological interview structure that is framed not by events an in individual’s personal life, but in terms of the war narrative.

For example, the first questions asked of interviewees Rita Boas Koupman and Rudolf Vrba are, respectively: “The first thing that, I’d like you to tell me about is, when the Germans first attacked Holland in May 1940, where were you and what was the reaction of your family when you realized they’d attacked Holland?”[[20]](#footnote-20) and “What I would like you to do is to go right back to the beginning, to when you first were discriminated against…to explain to us what that discrimination was and the way that you reacted to it.”[[21]](#footnote-21) In identifying “the beginning” not as the moment of Vrba’s birth, or his earliest memory, but as his first experience of victimization, the interviewer asserts unequivocally that this is an interview about the war and his experiences as a witness to and victim of that war, not about the war as one event in Vrba’s life. Framing the interviews in this way occasionally results in the absence of critical background information that is usually recorded in the opening stages of life history interviews. By opening with the Nazi invasion of Holland in 1940s, Boas Koupman is offered no opportunity to record key biographical information such as her age, place of residence, family members, or any other aspects of her prewar life that might be useful for understanding her experiences of discrimination. In fact, the listener is not even made aware that she is Jewish until she begins describing the “terrible” experience of having her passport marked with a “J.” This information may not be necessary for the purposes of a documentary that can ultimately use but seconds of an hour-and-a-half-long interview, but it is arguably essential contextual information for a researcher using the interview from the archive.

On this note, Margaret Brooks, who took over responsibility for the running of the department from David Lance in the early 1980s, commented that although the Thames Television interviews were sometimes longer than those the Sound Archive conducted, they were not like a life story in that the interviewers focused more on encouraging interviewees to “talk around” events of interest than on narrating their life experiences.[[22]](#footnote-22) Interviewees were asked, for example, “Can you can you explain to me about the ‘J’ in the identity card and how you felt about that?”; “Can you describe what you remember of your arrival at Auschwitz?”; “The next thing I want you to talk about is…what your own experience was at the [death] march”; “Can you remember, er, when you were—the day it was over—that you were free?”[[23]](#footnote-23) The questions were designed to elicit specific information that would be of most use in the documentary feature and, moreover, to generate responses that were sufficiently personal to provoke an emotional response in the viewer. For much of Rudolf Vrba’s interview, which is more than five hours long, his speech is impersonal, almost academic, and rarely does he recall events using personal pronouns. Vrba often rebuffs the interviewer’s attempts to ask personal questions, in some cases going as far as refusing to recount his personal experiences of an event, choosing instead to talk about the similar experiences of others. On one such occasion, persistent questioning attempts to alter the nature of Vrba’s responses from what is most natural to him to what is most valuable for the documentary, leading to the following extract:

TT: Can I ask you… I mean, can I ask you a very direct question? *You* and people like you who were prisoners, *you* knew what was going to happen so why—what would have happened if *you* had warned them, and indeed why didn’t you warn them?

RV: Because it was incredible for them to take… Don't forget that by time we were prisoners we didn't look like people whom they knew. For them, we were people dressed in criminals’ uniform, so if somebody went there and said, “Look you are going to be gassed” or something, **the idea for a mother being told after this terrible journey that her children are going to be gassed was an utter outrageous idea in our mind, because after all what she suffered, here comes a gangster who wants to increase her suffering, so she was expected to go immediately to the next neat officer, and say that this man says, sir, that my children are going to be gassed and he says, “Madam, do you think we are barbarians?”**[[24]](#footnote-24)

Vrba still struggles to answer the interviewer’s questions in terms of his own experiences, but the targeted nature of the questioning produces a powerful, almost indignant response from him that offers a small window onto Vrba’s efforts to comprehend and make sense of an impossible situation. The section highlighted in bold here appeared in episode twenty of the final documentary series, entitled “Genocide.”

**IWM interview program**

Despite its initial reluctance to interview survivors of the Holocaust, today the Sound Archive contains more than 700 interviews on the subject of the Holocaust, which were recorded by archive staff and outside assistants from the late 1970s to the present day.[[25]](#footnote-25) The introduction of the Holocaust into the interviewing program of the Sound Archive occurred in line with two changes to IWM and Sound Archive operations: a change in Sound Archive leadership and an ideological and cultural shift in attitudes concerning the perceived role of the IWM in engaging with World War II history. The earliest interviews to approach the topic were conducted for a Sound Archive project entitled *Britain and the Refugee Crisis, 1933–1947*, which commenced recording in 1978. The project sought to conduct interviews with refugees to Britain during the twentieth century, of which the “main bulk…was with people who had been either children or adults at the time in the 1930s, fleeing the rise of fascism in Europe.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

The project touched upon, but did not engage directly with the event that we now conceptualize as the Holocaust; a number of Jewish refugees were interviewed, but interviewees also included political and artistic refugees and other people of significance, such as scientists, and as Tony Kushner observed, “the interviews…were circumscribed by the attempt to place them in a specifically *British* context of war…with little or no attention paid in the interviews to the refugees’ lives before the Nazi era and what now seems like perfunctory coverage of their persecution in the Third Reich.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Kushner’s analysis of the development of Holocaust oral history at the IWM hinges on the ideological changes the museum underwent in the late twentieth century. Over the course of the late 1980s and early 1990s, contemporary awareness and understanding of the centrality of the genocide of the Jews to the World War II narrative grew, and the IWM gradually adapted its understanding of its responsibility as a cultural institution for national to global war commemoration. It was through documentaries and programs such as *The World at War* and the TV miniseries *Holocaust* (broadcast in 1978) that the subject was brought into the homes and consciousness of the public; thereafter, awareness of and interest in the Holocaust grew substantially in Britain, which resulted in increased lobbying for Holocaust commemoration and for the subject to be incorporated into the National Curriculum.

In response to this, and acknowledging the lack of material the museum had on the Holocaust at the time, in 1990 the director of the IWM, Alan Borg, agreed for the museum to hold more Holocaust material. This was followed in 1991 by the first Holocaust-related exhibition hosted by the IWM, *Belsen 1945*, which, in line with the IWM’s focus on British perspectives, related the experiences of the British liberators of Bergen-Belsen. The opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, in 1993 “further exposed the absence of a national place of commemoration in Britain,”[[28]](#footnote-28) and by 1996, the IWM had been selected as the site of a new national Holocaust exhibition, with Lord Bramall stating that the IWM, “a national, civilian, historical and educational museum whose remit embraced all aspects of war in the 20th century, was the right institution to undertake the responsibility.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

It was indeed against this historiographical background that the IWM Sound Archive began to conduct its own dedicated interviews with Holocaust survivors. But what Kushner does not account for in his analysis is the extent to which the methodological approach of the Sound Archive delineated the thematic content of the oral histories it collected and therefore the role that archive staff themselves played in determining the inclusion or exclusion of the Holocaust in the archive’s holdings.

*Britain and the Refugee Crisis* was the brainchild of Margaret Brooks, who was working on the project when she took over the running of the department. Reflecting on Lance’s project-based approach to archival oral history interviewing, Brooks recalls that this practice meant interviewers were encouraged to ask an interviewee only about the aspects of their story that were being researched, collecting memories relating up to and including the project focus.[[30]](#footnote-30) She took issue with this on the basis that approaching an interview with such narrow focus often meant that key details of a person’s story, however tangential to the project in question, were missed from the record, and though in some cases it was possible to re-interview, in many instances the museum became cut off from the interviewee or the interviewee passed away, and such material was lost from the record forever.

Lance’s resignation enabled Brooks to drop his narrow approach and to allow interviewees to talk beyond their direct experience of seeking refuge in Britain. The benefit of this new modus operandi for the Holocaust corpus is clear: interviews began to explore refugees’ wider experiences of World War II, which in a number of instances included significant reference to the Holocaust. In an interview she gave in 2013, Brooks describes one incident in which her interviewee—a man who emigrated to Britain at a young age—mentioned that it was only upon returning to Germany after the war that he learned what had happened to his parents: they had been killed during the Holocaust.[[31]](#footnote-31) The same is true of three other individuals interviewed for this project, and two more mention hearing details elsewhere about the concentration or extermination camps.[[32]](#footnote-32) “That was only an example,” Brooks stated, “but there were lots of things it made sense to me to continue with talking about, [including] the Holocaust.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

This marks the earliest point at which memories of or relating to the Holocaust began to appear in the IWM Sound Archive’s own interviews, predating the IWM-wide initiative to begin collecting Holocaust material by some years. Brooks’ methodology pushed the boundaries of what was considered acceptable or relevant material for the archive—and therefore the IWM—to collect. Though some people questioned the inclusion of the Holocaust in the IWM’s remit on the basis that it is “not primarily a ‘so-called’ British thing,” Brooks insisted upon its relevance, arguing that British people, and indeed the whole world, had been involved in some way, directly or indirectly, with the events of the Holocaust, thereby justifying its presence in the archive. Soon after assuming leadership of the department, Brooks dropped the project-based approach to structuring archive activities altogether: collecting was not entirely random and still conformed broadly to thematic areas of interest and prioritized the recording of the elderly, but the department was no longer required to focus solely on one project at a time.[[34]](#footnote-34) It was from this point onward—with an awareness that the memories of Holocaust survivors were vital for filling in the gaps in the archive—that the archive began to record interviews with Holocaust survivors in an intentional and committed fashion.

The methodological framework for the new IWM Sound Archive interviews can be described as archival: the project as a whole and the individual interviews were and are conducted for the express purpose of contributing information to the historical record. Under Lance’s leadership, this meant obtaining as much information as possible from witnesses about a particular, predetermined historical subject; under Brooks, when the majority of the Holocaust interviews were conducted, the methodology employed was broader and prioritized the agency of the interviewee to express, describe, and recount the event as it was witnessed, understood, and remembered by them. Brooks described the approach taken for the Holocaust interviews as follows: “Each interview was conducted in a flexible manner depending on what the informant was best able to articulate or felt to be important, though all the recordings follow a generally chronological pattern.”[[35]](#footnote-35) The interviewee was permitted to lead the narrative with varying degrees of influence from the interviewer, who would interject most often to encourage the interviewee to elaborate or to encourage the narrative’s chronological development.

The initial questions asked by Lyn Smith to both Barbara Stimler and Maria Beate Green set the interview up to begin chronologically; both interviewees responded by referencing where they lived and went to school, with short anecdotes about school and family life. In Stimler’s interview, Smith continues providing additional questions in the first half an hour to encourage Stimler to expand upon certain topics, asking about, for example, the size of her family or what happened to the people Stimler mentions survived the war.[[36]](#footnote-36) In the case of Green’s interview, her response to the initial question leads naturally to a description of an event of great significance to her: the assault her father experienced at the hands of the Nazi SA in March 1933. An extract from this section of the interview demonstrates the central role this incident plays in the narrator’s memory of the period:

I was lying in bed… [T]he door was unlocked, and I thought it was my mother, but she didn't come in and neither did the maid, which is what I normally would have expected. So I waited a little bit, and then I got out of my bed and went out into the corridor, which took me to opposite the bathroom, outside of which my father always hung his clothes. And there they were, drenched in blood… I knocked on my parents’ bedroom door. No answer. So I opened it gingerly and I just saw my father pull up his bedclothes so I shouldn’t see his face, and only his eyes were showing, and underneath the sheet he mumbled, “Wait till your mother—*warte bist deiner Mutter nach Hause kommt* [wait until your mother comes home]”…I crept out again and went back to bed. And I remember lying on my back, feeling not very good, feeling kind of empty. I suppose I was really scared… My mum came home and the maid came home, and there was a lot of talk, but never in front of me, and I realized they didn't want me to know what had happened, and I minded about that, because having seen what I had seen I needed to know. Which is why I now think children ought to be told everything right from the start; the hurt that you cause them by telling them the truth is not nearly as bad as the hurt by not telling them… I feel that so profoundly I didn't formulate it obviously in my head at the age of eight, but when I had children, I made jolly sure that I shared everything with them, good or bad.[[37]](#footnote-37)

In relating this anecdote and the ongoing impact it had on her life, the interviewee speaks for over thirteen minutes uninterrupted by Smith save for one occasion. The interviewer does not interrupt to redirect Green to maintain the chronology. She does not probe or inquire, instead leaving the floor open for Green to relate this event that is of clear, fundamental, defining importance for her. Green’s response to being asked about her background and life before the war is offered almost exclusively in terms of the role her father played in it: from taking her to school, to family mealtimes, to their forced relocation to their second home. The open interviewing style permits this kind of extended reminiscence to happen, and from it, we gain valuable insight into the most personally significant and formative aspects of the interviewee’s experiences.

In these recordings, the influence of the interviewer ensures that most interviews cover approximately the same topics—Margaret Brooks is correct in claiming that “a number of major strands or themes were developed: family life before the rise of Hitler, then the racial laws and Kristallnacht; the refugee experience…ghetto life, resistance activities…attempts to aid refugees or camp survivors, and reflections on the experiences, including visits after the war and the long-term effects of the Holocaust”[[38]](#footnote-38)—but beyond this, the interviewee is given the freedom to determine the specifics, in a manner that is highly revealing of the deeper meaning that he or she attributes to the events recalled.

**October Films**

The creation of the first national Holocaust Exhibition at IWM London offered the Sound Archive an innovative opportunity: to conduct a new oral history project, producing video interviews with Holocaust survivors specifically for inclusion in the exhibition. The completed exhibition contained several audio-visual presentations of edited clips taken from interviews with sixteen survivors produced by the production company October Films. Interviewees were chosen from a shortlist of survivors compiled by Margaret Brooks, curator Alison Murchie, and interviewer Lyn Smith who listened to recordings already in the Sound Archive, “noting those whose stories were especially well told, or who were special for some historical reason…whose reminiscences they had found particularly striking…[and] whose stories would stand for the experiences of millions.”[[39]](#footnote-39) These individuals were then re-interviewed on camera by October Films. Recording began in 1998, with sixteen individuals interviewed for between half a day and a full day each.

This collection of interviews produced by October Films is something of a unique collection within the IWM’s archive. The interviews sought to fulfill a very different function from the archival style interviews conducted by the IWM: in re-interviewing survivors whose testimonies were already held by the archive, the interviews could focus primarily on producing exhibition-quality material, rather than documenting the life histories of the survivors. Thus, they were subject to a far more rigid agenda that was determined not by the interviewee, but by the interviewer. Suzanne Bardgett, project director for the Holocaust Exhibition, stated that October Films “understood our need for programs that supported, rather than led, the main historical narrative.”[[40]](#footnote-40) The audio-visual survivor testimony films present in the exhibition are incorporated into several sub-sections of the exhibition narrative, indicated by headings as the viewer progresses through the exhibition. There are clear thematic parallels between these sub-sections and the lines of questioning used by the interviewer to generate relevant material for the corresponding testimony films. The sub-headings are outlined below along with examples of relevant questioning in the interviews with Barbara Stimler and Rudi Bamber.

These are:

*Life before the Nazis*: “Could you start by, um, describing to us what life was like for you as a child before the war?”; “Tell me about your childhood—how would you describe it?”

*Outcasts*: “Could you tell me a little bit more about how the Jews were singled out by the Germans and what you remember about that?”

*Nazi Policy toward the Polish Jews*: “Can you tell me how you and your family felt about having to wear yellow stars?”

*Ghettos*: “So just tell us a little bit about the description of the Lodz ghetto and your sense of being cut off and isolated.”

*Death Marches*: “Could you explain, um, why you were taken from the labor camp on the march [based on] what you understood at that time—why you were taken on the march?”

*Reflections*: “Do you have any sense of forgiveness toward the Germans, or what is your own attitude?”; “What do you think about all these events now? How—how do you try and make sense of them?”[[41]](#footnote-41)

Though the testimonies are designed to fit with the linear chronology of the exhibition, interviewer Annie Dodds acknowledged that there was less need to conduct these interviews in chronological order, as the editing process would enable them to iron out any narrative inconsistencies prior to inclusion in the exhibition.[[42]](#footnote-42) As a result, when the sound recordings are listened to in full, they occasionally lack the narrative flow that can be found in the IWM Sound Archive interviews. In this collection, the need to produce material most valuable for a media production often superseded the right of the interviewee to communicate his or her experiences freely, often to the extent that interviewees were interrupted or cut short by new and occasionally unrelated lines of questioning. One notable incident occurs when Barbara Stimler is describing her arrival at Auschwitz:

BS: And, that’s how we got there, and then I don’t, you know, I’m getting a little muddled up with this. It’s very very difficult for me to remember that becau—

AD: I think we’ll cut there actually.

BS: Yes, okay, but I wanted to say that we also went— [tape cuts]

AD: So, Barbara, could you explain, um, why you were taken from the labor camp on the march [based on] what you understood at that time—why you were taken on the march?[[43]](#footnote-43)

In this interview excerpt, Stimler verbally indicates her difficulty in accessing particular memories and her internal struggle to reproduce them coherently. Rather than allow Stimler to work through this memory process and for the process itself to be documented in the recording, the interviewer not only calls an end to a particular line of thought, but also actively prevents Stimler from relating a part of her story that she has expressed an interest in retelling. Dodds stated, “There was a continual critical balance between allowing the witnesses to tell their stories in their own way, while at the same time making sure we got what we needed,”[[44]](#footnote-44) but ultimately the pressing need to produce appropriate material for the exhibition was prioritized over any real commitment to allowing interviewees to tell their stories in their own terms.

That said, in pursuing such targeted lines of questioning, Dodds was able to lead interviewees to recount events that may not carry the most personal significance—and thus were not offered of the interviewee’s own accord—but are nonetheless of wider interest. Moreover, some of the more consciously reflective questions posed by Dodds created the opportunity for interviewees to discuss their experiences on a more philosophical level that occurs less frequently in the IWM interviews. The final room in the Holocaust Exhibition contains two solitary screens, side by side, one showing October Films interview material and the other showing footage of concentration camps as they appear in the present day. The interview clips used in this section of the exhibition show survivors reflecting on their Holocaust experiences, describing the lasting impact the Holocaust had on their lives and offering words of advice for future generations. These words of wisdom are procured through specific lines of questioning directed at each interviewee at the end of their interview. The questions are occasionally leading and sometimes provocative, but successfully prompt powerful responses from interviewees. The following example is taken from the final two minutes of Kitty Hart-Moxon’s two-and-a-half-hour interview for October Films:

AD: Do you feel depressed sometimes when, er, you see what is happening in the news today? Do you feel that no lessons have been learned?

KHM: Er, I think I’m absolutely positive that no lessons or very few lessons have been learned from the past, er, because if lessons had been learned, you wouldn’t today have, er, as many extremists or dictators who had gained power. If people had learned lessons, they wouldn’t allow this, and maybe, **maybe a testimony like mine—the importance of it is to serve as a warning to future generations, because, erm, the danger is that whether you’re black or whether you’re white, whether you’re Christian, whether you’re Muslim or whether you’re a Jew, what happened to me could in [the] future happen to you.[[45]](#footnote-45)**

The section highlighted in bold here appears in the final exhibition film.

**Audiences**

What I have endeavored to demonstrate is not just how the IWM’s production or collection of Holocaust testimonies has been determined by the IWM’s broader engagement with the Holocaust, but specifically how that context has resulted in the production or collection of a wide range of methodologically disparate and thus topically diverse oral histories that vary in the ways in which they approach and explore the experiences and memories of witnesses to the Holocaust.

The interviews conducted by staff for the Sound Archive differ substantially from those recorded by October Films for the Holocaust Exhibition because they employ two distinct methodological approaches to conducting oral history: an archival approach and an exhibitional approach. In the interviews conducted by the archive for the archive, agency is largely given to the interviewee to determine the narrative flow and discuss elements of their experiences that the individual considered most significant or remembers most powerfully. The interviews are structured broadly chronologically to ensure that interviewees have the opportunity to explore their wartime experience as well as the parts of their life story that might give context to their wartime experience, with guidance offered by the interviewer to aid the interviewee in recounting topics of potential interest to both the museum and potential future researchers.

In contrast, the content of the October Films material is dictated by external interests that comparatively limit individual narrative control and self-expression, but encourage the elicitation of information that the interviewee may not have offered of his or her own accord. Structure and chronology are of less importance; interviewees are encouraged to relate prewar and postwar experiences only insofar as they might usefully contribute to the relevant areas of the exhibition and are often asked to repeat their recollections multiple times in the same interview to produce periods of recounting that would remain coherent once such moments had been extracted from the interview and presented in isolation in an exhibition. As shown, the Thames Television material reflects a documentary approach to interviewing, in which the emotional component of the individual’s experience is used to enhance and expand collective knowledge of particular historical events.

The nature of oral history is such that (at least) two parties are always involved in its production; in the words of oral historian Alessandro Portelli, “Oral sources always have at least two ‘authors’—the narrator and the person whose questions (indeed, whose mere willing presence) open the space and create the time for the account to be given, and who intervenes dialogically…in the course of its unfolding.”[[46]](#footnote-46) The analysis here has barely scratched the surface of the ways in which these interactions play out in the interviews contained in the IWM Sound Archive. There is a great deal more to be said about the nature of the interviewer–interviewee relationship, including, for example, the background and training of interviewers, the age and motivations of interviewees, the extent of an interviewer’s intervention over the course of the interview, and the nature of those interventions as and when they occur. What this analysis does illustrate is the point made by Lynn Abrams, that “the production of an oral history is an event which cannot be separated from the context in which it is performed. Storytelling of any kind, including oral history, is a social activity which cannot take place without an audience.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Each of the testimony collections referred to here responds to a different need of the IWM and its associated organizations; these “audiences” are therefore contextual products as much as the methodology and the technology involved in their production. In each collection contained in the IWM Sound Archive, Holocaust survivors were called upon to perform their testimony to a different audience: to a TV-watching public, to tourists or schoolchildren, or to future generations of researchers.

That said, this is not necessarily how survivors themselves perceive the interviewing process. Reflecting on her research into changes and consistencies in Holocaust survivor testimonies over time, Sharon Kangisser Cohen corroborates Abrams’ argument about performance in oral history particularly with respect to later Holocaust collections, but on the notion of “testimony” she makes the following observation: “After reflecting on the interaction between interviewer and interviewee…I maintain that over the past six decades the relationship between the two does not alter the way the survivors relate to the task at hand. They are committed to giving an account of their wartime experiences, and for the most part they are willing and compliant interviewees.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Henry Greenspan likewise questions whether Holocaust survivors are, in fact, so willing to subjugate themselves to the whims and desires of an interviewer or interviewing body on any such occasion in which they give their testimony:

Of course, to say that survivors’ retelling is affected by survivors’ listeners—or by survivors’ perceptions of their listeners—may be a truism of only limited usefulness. Do survivors sometimes shape their recounting to meet what they perceive their listeners need or want to hear? Yes, sometimes they do. Do survivors sometimes retell with relative indifference to their listeners’ expectations? Yes, sometimes they do. Do survivors, at times, shape their retelling directly to challenge—indeed, to protest—their listeners’ presumptions? Yes, that is also sometimes true.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Both Greenspan and Kangisser Cohen assert that there is something innate about a survivor’s testimony—in many ways predetermined by his or her decision to speak about his or her experiences—that may resist or defy any outside attempt to contain it. For Greenspan, there is a useful distinction to be made here between “recounting” and “testimony” that is useful in approaching archived oral histories: “‘Recounting,’ it has seemed to me, better connotes the provisional and processual nature of retelling—a series of what are *always* compromises that always point beyond themselves. ‘Recounting’ may also better suggest the emergence of retelling within conversation, in contrast with testimonies as one-way transmissions that listeners simply ‘get’ or ‘gather.’”[[50]](#footnote-50)

That these two notions might appear in conflict with one another is clearly visible in the case of Barbara Stimler, whom we have already observed at odds with an interviewer about which parts of her story were considered important enough for the recording in question. If her interview for October Films is compared with the original interview she gave to the IWM two years prior, it is clear that she is telling the same story—giving the same testimony—on each occasion, but that the parts of that core narrative that we have access to is contingent upon the methods that brought them into being, both in the sense of what topics a collection chooses to approach when it outlines the purpose of the recording, and the opportunities that are accorded to an interviewee to speak, including through questions that range here from the openly reflective and exploratory to the prescriptive and performative. What is clear is that in each of the collections considered, the interactions between interviewer and interviewee have been circumscribed by the function that the interview is deemed to fulfill at the moment it is produced, be it a record for an historical archive, visual and informational material for a documentary film, or a performance of testimony to be situated within an educational exhibition. That process by necessity constructs the nature of the survivor’s testimony, as it is ultimately hearable by us in whichever recording we might choose to listen to.

**A museological approach to oral history**

In focusing specifically on accumulating bodies of testimony from Holocaust survivors, many archives of Holocaust oral histories—the USC Shoah Visual History Archive, for example, founded in 1994 “to videotape and preserve interviews with survivors and other witnesses of the Holocaust”[[51]](#footnote-51)—justify their purpose by asserting the intrinsic value of their material. The IWM, however, incorporates the Holocaust into its wider function as a museum dedicated to the subject of twentieth-century warfare, and the material collected by its Sound Archive over the course of its existence has, as I have shown, been curated within the context of the IWM’s contemporary academic relationship to its subject matter. As Tony Kushner summarizes, “The case study of the Imperial War Museum provides a clear insight into how British understanding and confrontation with the Holocaust has developed in the post-war period. The Museum has struggled in the past thirty years to develop from a narrowly defined and nationalistic display of military hardware illustrating Britain’s success in twentieth century warfare into something more socially and internationally inclusive.”[[52]](#footnote-52) All Holocaust oral history material in the archive reflects this relationship between the museum and the Holocaust as defined by the extent to which the Holocaust was considered a part of World War II and Britain’s military history. The Thames Television Holocaust interviews were acquired by virtue of their being situated among a large quantity of generic World War II material, early Sound Archive interviews with witnesses to the Holocaust were included as part of a project focusing on the experiences of refugees to Britain prior to World War II, and October Films and later Sound Archive interviews were created once the IWM had accepted that the Holocaust had a place in its remit and agreed to hold more material on the Holocaust.

On a practical level, a number of limitations restricted what each collection was able to contribute to the archive. The selection criteria and acquisition policies for the IWM Sound Archive have changed little since Peter Hart published a copy in the IASA Special Publication in 1984. Two of the key restrictions—a lack of space and finite resources—mean that all the material incorporated into the archive must, to the greatest extent possible, contribute to the fulfillment of the museum’s responsibilities to the development of a balanced historical record, the facilitation of academic research, and the education of the general public.[[53]](#footnote-53) Bearing in mind a characteristic of institutionally operated sound archives pointed out by David Lance—that “most oral history archives have been set up with either a regional or a special subject emphasis”[[54]](#footnote-54)—given the Britain-centric remit of the IWM, it is unsurprising that the vast majority of interviewees for IWM-initiated projects are British residents. Both the Sound Archive and October Films projects purport to include the widest possible range of experiences,[[55]](#footnote-55) but limitations on finances and resources meant priority was accorded by necessity to those whose experiences were most relevant to the project and most easily accessed given the logistics of recording.[[56]](#footnote-56) Financial limitations in particular restricted the reach of the IWM Sound Archive to those residing in Britain only, despite the feeling that it would be beneficial to extend its efforts abroad; the October Films project was limited both by time and financial concerns, resulting in the decision to almost exclusively re-interview individuals whose previous interviews were already held by the Sound Archive.[[57]](#footnote-57) The inclusion of the Thames Television material substantially increases the diversity of the experiences represented by the recordings in the archive, not least because of the access this project had to individuals residing abroad and the language skills necessary to conduct and translate interviews with non-English or non-native English speakers. That said, though the Thames Television collection includes material collected from German, American, and Japanese witnesses, its subjects are also primarily British residents.[[58]](#footnote-58)

The nature of the Holocaust material held by the IWM Sound Archive can generally be summarized in the following ways: it is a collection of material that tells the story of a society’s relationship to World War II and the gradual acceptance of the Holocaust as an integral part of that particular historical event and, ultimately, of the Holocaust as an important historical event in its own right. The earlier the material was created, the more heavily the war narrative is likely to dominate within it. Collectively, it forms a corpus of historical source material that presents an individual, personal, and otherwise unattainable perspective of the genocide of the Jews and persecution of minorities that took place during World War II. Much of the material contained within the collection has been generated specifically to inform and educate the general public and has been designed to evoke strong emotional responses in its viewers. Crucially, the corpus presents a primarily British perspective of the Holocaust, where “British” is understood to refer to individuals who are British by birth, refugees to Britain during and after the war, and those who relocated to Britain by choice, all of whom are able to communicate their experiences in English. The IWM Sound Archive Holocaust testimony collection is not a collection of oral histories with Holocaust survivors, but a curated collection of collections that tells its own story.

The multifarious nature of the Holocaust collections held by the IWM Sound Archive is arguably one of its greatest strengths. The multitude of methodological approaches used to engage the genre of oral history in the collection, as well as preservation and dissemination of historical knowledge means that the Sound Archive now contains interviews with survivors and witnesses that use subjective experiences to illuminate objective facts, interviews that prioritize the value of associative processes of memory and reminiscence, interviews that focus on engaging directly with emotional responses, and more. Accessing the merits of this diverse collection of material is not a straightforward process, however; while recordings are relatively easy to access either online or from the Research Room at the Imperial War Museum London, the material needed for full contextualization is far less accessible. To facilitate the contextualization process, Margaret Brooks stated that it is imperative that “oral history archives keep methodological records both of their own interviewing procedure and of the contents of their collections…[for] future users will best be able to assess the nature and relevance of the oral history material if they are able to study the framework of the appropriate part of the collection.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Despite this recommendation from the former keeper of the Sound Archive, the archive today admits that very little extraneous documentation relating to Sound Archive activities is kept, not least because of a lack of space.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Contextual material relating to the Thames Television series *The World at War* is more readily available; fortunately, its cult status has led to a substantial number of essays and books being written about the project, though admittedly, the interview process is often neglected in these histories. Moreover, despite the abundance of different oral recordings in the archive, the various sources of material are barely distinguishable from one another when searching the online catalogue. It is impossible to draw up a list of all the interviews belonging to any one project, so to find specific material one is forced to rely either on the availability of physical copies of collection catalogues, which exist for some but not all of the collections mentioned, or on results produced by searching the online catalogue for key terms such as “Holocaust” and filtering using the index terms assigned to each entry, which are often inconsistently applied.The potential value of the IWM Holocaust testimony collection for researchers is huge, but as it stands, much more could be done to enable the archive to reach its full potential in this regard.

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