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VOICES IN THE MUSEUM. VIDEOTAPED TESTIMONIES AS OBJECTS OF CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL HERITAGE IN THE JEWISH CULTURAL QUARTER AMSTERDAM

“It became the Jewish theatre, ‘de Joodsche Schouwburg’. With the understanding that only Jewish artists were performing on stage, only Jewish artists in the orchestra, only Jewish costume designers, choreographers, [...] and for only Jewish audiences, because we had IDs, which we had to show [...] Then from one night to the next, I came to rehearsal with seven other people, this theatre was turned into a deportation centre for Jews. The night before, there was one Nazi backstage. He looked at everything. He didn’t touch anything. He was very quiet. He tiptoed. He bowed and he said ‘Entschuldigen Sie bitte. Ich hoffe dass ich Sie nicht gestört habe.’ (‘Excuse me I hope I did not disturb you.’) And I was flabbergasted and I said, ‘No, not at all.’ Nobody knew why. Why was he here? What did he do? [...] The next day he was back, he told us, the seven who had been there, we were seven of us, we had to stay and this was a deportation centre now for Jews. And if we didn’t like it, we could volunteer and be on the first transport tonight. And then they came, our audiences, by the hundreds, by the hundreds, by the hundreds, and we had each a duty to perform which was impossible to perform. We didn’t have blankets, we didn’t have water, we didn’t have milk. We had nothing, it is a theatre! We were not prepared for it. [...] ‘Where are they are going to send us? And why? Can you help us? Can you get us out?’ They gave us candle sticks, they gave us blankets, they gave us books, they dragged half their households behind them. And we couldn’t do anything. And at night trucks came, and off they went.” (Testimony Grohs-Martin 1995)

In less than five minutes, the dancer and singer Silvia Grohs-Martin (born in Vienna in 1918) depicts the transformation of the *Hollandsche Schouwburg* in

Amsterdam from a thriving Jewish theatre under occupation to an assembly point for Jews awaiting deportation. It was at this “Umschlagplatz” (collection point, a place where Jews were forced to go prior to deportation), as the occupiers called it, that more than 46,000 Jews – men, women and children – started their journey to the Nazi extermination camps in occupied Poland. After a brief period being held as prisoners in the theatre building most were herded into waiting trucks or trams and transported to trains to take them to the transit camps of either Westerbork or Vught, both in the Netherlands. From there, they went on to an almost certain death. Grohs-Martin’s interview describes the annexation of the building. We see her as an elderly lady, fluent in English but with an obvious Austrian accent, and as an actress. She uses the tone of her voice, a glance of her eye to underline the dramatic event she was part of. No description by a historian, curator or educator equals Grohs-Martin’s recollections of this watershed event in the history of the Hollandsche Schouwburg. Her narrative highlights the “choice-less choice” (Langer 1982: 72) the artists faced when confronted with their new job, the large number of people crowded into a building not suitable for its new purpose, the anxiety felt by so many and the deportation of the innocent. But it doesn’t include the date, 20 July 1942, or the name of the Nazi officer inspecting the building, SS-Hauptsturmführer Ferdinand aus der Fünften. He and his superior, Willy Lages, were responsible for the deportation of Jews from Amsterdam. These facts we gather from other sources. The fragment of Grohs-Martin’s testimony was used in a video installation at the Hollandsche Schouwburg describing its wartime history. This paper describes the video testimony collection of the Jewish Cultural Quarter (JCQ – *Joods Cultureel Kwartier*) group, of which the Hollandsche Schouwburg is a part, its use, and how and why certain fragments are included in the exhibitions.

The Jewish Cultural Quarter and its Collections

The Jewish Cultural Quarter in Amsterdam (JCQ) is about people, both the people whose history and culture it depicts in its exhibitions and the visitors who come to these exhibitions. Jewish history in the Netherlands covers

more than 400 years. With its four historic locations – the *Jewish Historical Museum* (JHM), the *Portuguese Synagogue*, the *Hollandsche Schouwburg* and the *National Holocaust Museum* (under development, but opened in 2016) – the JCQ focus covers this entire period with exhibitions on art, religion, identity, Jewish history and the Holocaust. The JCQ’s collection features some 200,000 items, such as ceremonial objects, works of art, applied arts, and a vast collection of historical documents, photos and audio-visual materials including the video testimony collection, which is in the Jewish Historical Museum’s archives. As the mission of the JCQ is to further knowledge about Jewish history and culture in general, the museum collections focus wider than just Holocaust history and memory. In the video testimony collection, however, the Holocaust is heavily represented. The video testimony collection includes material from various sources. The first is the *2,000 Witnesses* collection, accessible at the JHM and the *Hollandsche Schouwburg*, which is part of the larger *Visual History Archive of the USC Shoah Foundation* (VHA). Half of the 2,000 testimonies were recorded in the Netherlands and the other half includes testimonies of survivors from the Netherlands recorded in other parts of the world. Grohs-Martin’s was recorded in the United States. These testimonies are all related to the Holocaust, depicting the lives of survivors before, during and after the persecution. A few non-Jewish rescuers are included in the *2,000 Witnesses* collection, and a testimony from a Jehovah’s Witness. This collection is accessible by key words through a local search engine, and offers a detailed description of each segment in the interview. The JHM also holds about 650 testimonies recorded for specific exhibitions or related to a specific theme or research topic. These include testimonies about religious ceremonies used in the permanent exhibition on religion and testimonies with a specific focus, such as Jewish members of various resistance groups during the Holocaust. The witnesses, Jews and non-Jews, all have links with Jewish history, but there are no testimonies (yet) from perpetrators or collaborators during the Holocaust. A few of the 650 testimonies are only available in audio form. Furthermore, the museum has a collection of documentaries made by external professionals, sometimes together with

unedited video material recorded for the documentary, including many Holocaust-related interviews. Since the opening of the National Holocaust Museum (NHM) in 2016, staff have hosted live interviews with survivors on a regular basis. These interviews and the interaction with the audiences is recorded and added to the collection. The JHM also experiments with recording memories, stories and anecdotes of museum visitors during specially organised events. During an exhibition on Jews in the former Dutch Indies together with the Riboet theatre group, a storytelling booth was set up for visitors to share their memories. These recordings are not included in the museum's collection. It is obvious that the JCQ acknowledges the importance and relevance of videotaped testimonies in its collections. They are treated just like other items in the archive collection, except that they are not made available through the internet. Video testimonies offer their own specific value to the collection. First, testimonies contain knowledge and information that is otherwise not recorded. Witnesses, if interviewed well, tell personal experiences, individual recollections, which may shed light on bigger historic events. They include not only the witness's words but also the setting of the interview and the body language, which might not otherwise be recorded. Testimonies also add an additional layer to history: recorded retrospectively, they show the ongoing effects of historical events long after they occurred. The witness leaves "the book of history open", so to speak. In addition, testifying is important for many Holocaust survivors. Having survived against all odds, some have committed their lives to not forgetting and to passing on the legacy. There may also be a need to create a personal monument: with their survival and their testimony, they erect a monument for the perished. Finally, they confirm through their existence and survival that National Socialism failed to kill them and failed to erase the memory of their lives, just as it also failed to destroy all the traces of its crimes.

Videotaped Testimonies as Sources in the Museum

The JCQ does not aim to merely acquire videotaped testimonies as collection holdings but also to make them available in a museum setting for our

visitors. Videotaped testimonies are available through various activities around the JCQ, including education. Informative segments of testimonies about the Hollandsche Schouwburg, for example, have been published on a DVD and some selected clips serve as preparatory lessons for school groups. An important testimony in the educational DVD is the contribution of Lydia van Nobelen-Riezouw (born 1923). During the deportation phase of the Hollandsche Schouwburg's history, she was living next door. As a non-Jew, she became a bystander and reflects during her testimony on her own role. In July 1942, she witnessed a friend being held at the Hollandsche Schouwburg and decided to take some photos. Van Nobelen-Riezouw frankly reveals that after several months she had become accustomed to the deportation site next door, and she became indifferent.

"You just saw these trucks standing there and the people getting in. Sometimes they were pushed in and others pulled them in. That is what you saw. I got used to it. It became very normal, seeing the truck was like seeing a tram passing it is like, 'Hey, there goes tram 7'." (Interview van Nobelen-Riezouw 1992)

Another important use of the testimonies is research, and the content of testimonies is made accessible through publications. Testimonies proved to be a major source of information for the reconstruction of the history of the JCQ's Hollandsche Schouwburg. The records are fragmented, scattered over many different archives. Silvia Grohs-Martin's memories on the crucial moments when the Hollandsche Schouwburg was turned into an "Umschlagplatz" are not documented in any other collection. It is one of the many memories included in the concise biography of the building that was published in 2013 (Van Vree et al). Confirmation of the accuracy of her testimony came from circumstantial documents such as transport lists, minutes of a meeting of the board of the Portuguese Synagogue, postal documents and the theatre's programme.

A third important activity is the use of testimonies during public events and interactive activities with the audiences. As coordinator and initiator of the

Open Jewish Homes commemorations, the JCQ offers testimonies at some of the hundreds of sites where these events took place. And finally, the JCQ includes testimonies in museum exhibitions and other displays.

Testimonies in Exhibitions

The first question that needs to be answered about the possible use of a video testimony in an exhibition is its aim. Is it to provide factual information, or to add a personal layer? Does it need additional clarification? Is its purpose to document the diversity of Jewish life? There are numerous reasons why video testimonies are included in museum exhibitions, and often it is for a combination of reasons. At the JHM, the interview with Marlene Sanders (born 1948) in the permanent exhibition on Jewish religion is a good example of how a personal recount not only clarifies the use of an object but also adds a personal interpretation. Her testimony is offered next to the historic *mikveh*, a ritual bath, at the museum. Sanders not only explains the religious practices, how the bath takes place and what prayers are said, she also adds her personal perception of the tradition, allowing visitors to relate to it.

“The union you are going to have with your husband may be blessed, and that He may be present, it is the most holy moment. You are in fact pulling down a living soul, and in that way life conquers death.” (Interview M. Sanders 2004)

In the JHM’s permanent exhibition on Jewish history during the 20th century, Johan Sanders (born 1931) recounts his memories of his childhood city Enschede, in the east of the Netherlands, prior to the Second World War. Sanders provides general historical facts, especially about the textile industry in Enschede and the role of local Jewish entrepreneurs. Within his testimony, Sanders himself is hardly visible. Original film footage of the city before the war is edited on to his narrative. His testimony functions as a voice-over. The clip does not provide personal details and experiences. As this exhibition includes a large section on the Holocaust, Sanders also explains about the fate of the Jewish community in Enschede during the Holocaust

and his own survival in hiding (Testimony J. Sanders 2007). His testimony is shown beside a large piece of yellow fabric with stars printed on it. This fabric was manufactured in one of Enschede's confiscated Jewish textile factories in 1942. In just one working shift, all the yellow stars were printed to brand the Jews in the Netherlands from 3 May 1942 onwards. It is a good example of how testimony and artefacts complement each other. In the same exhibition, the testimony of Leny Boeken-Velleman (born 1922) is included beside an artefact used for disinfecting repatriated Jews after the liberation. This Amsterdam-born Holocaust survivor describes some of her humiliating experiences arriving back to the Netherlands as the only surviving member of her family. She describes the great difficulty she encountered trying to recover some of her personal belongings that had been stolen by her former neighbours. Her restrained emotions when showing these items on camera and her confirmation that they are very precious evoke empathy and at the same time are an accusation towards the immediate post-war Dutch society and its inability to acknowledge Jewish suffering during the Holocaust (Interview Boeken-Velleman 2007).

Visitors at the JHM watch these segments of testimonies on small video screens, presenting them almost as individual encounters. In most cases, the visitor can sit while watching. The film offers close-ups, allowing the viewer to see the facial expressions of the witness. The testimonies are in Dutch subtitled in English. The testimonies are positioned among many artefacts on display. At the Hollandsche Schouwburg, an audio-visual installation provides a major source of information about the wartime history of the site. The installation is projected onto a large screen for many visitors to sit and watch, with an additional small screen for individual use. The educational DVD mentioned earlier is available on this small screen. There are no other artefacts on display in this space. The building itself, as the authentic site of the deportations, functions as a museum object. All spoken texts here are subtitled in English, or in Dutch if recorded in a different language. Witnesses are introduced by their name and year of birth, and the year of the recording is shown. Groh-Martin's testimony is part of this big screen installation.

She is one of more than 10 witnesses in a 30-minute presentation. Most clips originate from the 2,000 Witnesses VHA-collection and some of the footage is visibly dated. With regards to the physical description of the Hollandsche Schouwburg during the deportation period, multiple voices offer understanding over changes in the situation. During 16 months of deportations, adaptations were made to the building. Theatre seating was removed, registration of new arrivals took place at various locations, and the storage of luggage was organised in various ways. We can reconstruct these changes from the testimonies. Apart from changes and adaptations, the testimonies give insight into how daily routines were organised. The arrival at the Hollandsche Schouwburg is described by several witnesses. Abraham Caransa (born 1927) offers some clear memories:

“Behind the entrance we were registered. We didn’t have to hand in our house keys since our home was still inhabited [...] those who left their home with all their family members had to hand in their keys [...] We were registered and entered the auditorium.” (Testimony 1995) | 1

Caransa is one of the few witnesses to have described the handing in of house keys as a procedure to enable the looting of the homes of deportees later. His information is confirmed by the existence of several so-called key lists drafted in the Hollandsche Schouwburg. Corroborating personal recollections with other historic resources has proved necessary, as some testimonies include inaccuracies. Though other people’s testimonies may also function as confirmation. Catharina Polak-Soep (born 1923) provides insight into a ruse at the theatre:

“They put us downstairs, together with the people that were supposed to be sent to Westerbork, and upstairs there were the people that were supposed to go to Vught [...] When a train was planned for Westerbork they put us up on the balconies and then when Vught had to go, they put us down with the people for Westerbork. That is how we stayed there, incarcerated, for five weeks. Eventually they got us out.” (Testimony 1995)

Her memories were confirmed by similar recollections from other former prisoners.

The Hollandsche Schouwburg became the place where Dutch collaborators handed over Jews they had hunted down. A financial bounty was paid to them for each Jew brought into captivity. Hundreds of these receipts were preserved and archived in special judicial files after the war. They were used as evidence in post-war criminal trials against these collaborators, but access to them is limited and they are not allowed to be shown in public. The testimony of Simon Peereboom (born 1923) in which he names his Dutch countrymen and openly accuses them of aiding the deportation of himself and his wife is an important statement in the installation. It adds a piece of confronting information and shows Peereboom's personal need to record this evil. When he does not immediately recollect both names, he makes an effort and finally succeeds in naming them both (Testimony Peereboom 1995). Due to privacy laws, there is no other way beside oral history of displaying this type of information in a museum exhibition.

What is not Shown in the Exhibition

In the case of Peereboom, Polak-Soep's testimony or Boeken-Velleman's recollections about her repatriation, the clips only reflect a small portion of what these survivors actually recount in their testimonies. Peereboom and Boeken-Velleman survived Auschwitz. Polak-Soep returned from Bergen-Belsen and they, like others, describe in detail about these haunting experiences. It is often these experiences that influenced their post-war lives most. However, the JCQ staff decided to show only the segments needed for the exhibition's narrative and leave out these traumatic experiences. The naming and remembering of lost family members is also not shown in the exhibition setting, although this is often an important reason why witnesses recorded their life story in the first place. The witnesses trust the museum with all their traumatic experiences, their intimate recollections, and the museum staff disregard most of it in the exhibition. The exhibition curator

often reduces a life story to one or two segments with a specific content. Every time, this poses an ethical dilemma on how to use the legacy of survivors. In the audio-visual installation as well as on the DVD, viewers are invited to visit the museum resource centre and hear the full testimony.

In the exhibition *Tangible Memories from the Jewish Monument* at the National Holocaust Museum, the selected fragments from testimonies take this further. The modest exhibition depicting the brief lives of Jewish children who perished during the Holocaust, includes an artefact and a photo with segments from testimonies. The exhibition serves both as an informative and as a commemorative exhibition, in combination with a digital platform ¹² commemorating the 104,000 Jews from the Netherlands who were murdered. The testimonies used do not share survivors' memories of the persecution but talk about the children who were killed. They are delivered by surviving siblings. These brothers and sisters were all invited at some point to share their personal testimony during a public event at the museum and relate to the display about their sibling in the exhibition. By organising these life testimonies, the museum acknowledges the importance of presenting survivors of the Holocaust not merely as witnesses of that period but as complete personalities and contemporaries of our audiences. Videotaped testimonies do not just make the JCO's exhibitions more attractive. In museums for and about people, the lively voices add explanations or experiences to artefacts, religious traditions and historic events that are valuable and appreciated. They often bridge the distance between the visitor and the unknown. They provide unique information and insight for the broader public and for researchers. As such, they are carriers of cultural and historical heritage and belong in a museum collection.

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- 1 Dutch: "Bij binnenkomst werden we geregistreerd. Wij moesten onze huissleutels niet afgeven want ons huis was nog bewoond. Zij die hun huis met het hele gezin hadden verlaten moesten hun sleutels afgeven. We werden geregistreerd en gingen de zaal in".

- 2 See www.joodsmonument.nl, accessed 19 September 2017.