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THE SEARCH FOR AN APPROPRIATE APPROACH. VIDEO TESTIMONIES AND THEIR USE IN THE JEWISH MUSEUM HOHENEMS

Videotaped testimonies of victims of the National Socialistic regime are nowadays an essential parts of collections in museums, memorial sites as well as education centres. Their purpose is diverse: although often used in temporary exhibitions and as a crucial part of educational programmes in institutions with a focus on Jewish history and the Holocaust, video testimonies are not always displayed as primary objects in permanent exhibitions in Jewish museums in Europe, for example such as the *Jewish Museum London* (United Kingdom), the *Auschwitz Jewish Centre* (Poland), the *Vilna Gaon State Jewish Museum* (Lithuania), the *Jewish Museum and Tolerance Centre in Moscow* (Russia) and the *Jewish Museum Hohenems* (Austria).¹ Indeed, many permanent exhibitions make relatively little use of video interviews. Although the Holocaust is a well presented topic, sometimes even the main topic in certain sections or in whole museums, videotaped testimonies do not seem to be regarded as appropriate or suitable “primary objects”.

This paper aims to highlight the approach taken by European Jewish museums to the question of how, to what end and in which context video footage or videotaped testimonies can be used, presented and displayed. It questions the purpose of Jewish museums in Europe and the purpose of displaying video testimonies of Holocaust survivors in permanent exhibitions. It also outlines the technical and content advantages and disadvantages of video interviews in permanent exhibitions. Reference to the permanent exhibition in the *Jewish Museum Hohenems* is meant to exemplify general ideas and thoughts on this topic and emphasise the arguments. Finally, this paper discusses

further use of video testimonies within the context of the museum's role in Hohenems, for example for educational purposes.

European Jewish Museums and the Display of Video Testimonies

The observation that videotaped testimonies of Holocaust survivors are rarely used in permanent exhibitions in Jewish museums throughout Europe leads to the thesis that these videos might not be suitable for this kind of museum or this kind of exhibition. The following provides an insight by explaining the purpose of survivor interviews as a historical source within a Jewish museum, and arguing for the need for a specific function, location and technical setting of videos in permanent exhibitions.

Jewish museums differ from institutions such as commemorative sites or Holocaust museums not only in their general principle but also in their function. Jewish museums are *neither* Holocaust museums *nor* memorials. They do not *solely* focus on the history of the Jewish people during the Nazi regime or the history of the Holocaust. Jewish museums instead display the history of the Jews in a certain country, region or even town – usually starting with the earliest appearance of Jewish life in that specific location. More general cultural movements or developments, such as the Jewish Enlightenment, assimilation, immigration, etc., are simultaneously shown within their specific social, cultural and political context. Moreover, Jewish history chronicles a religious as well as a social and cultural minority, so the purpose of Jewish museums is to inform about different periods of Jewish life and religion in their historical contexts. Different museums have different approaches; some focus on ancient history as well as the history of the Jews in their specific context, other museums focus on more recent Jewish history – starting with the Middle Ages and early modern times. Furthermore, Jewish museums in Europe, unlike those in the United Kingdom or the United States, are mostly funded by the state, not by the Jewish communities. The agenda and therefore also the purpose is different: state-funded Jewish museums do not necessarily represent a specific Jewish community but rather Jewish history, Jewish life and culture in various forms.

The Jewish Museum Hohenems in Austria was founded in 1990 after more than a decade of local discussions on public uses for the Villa Heimann Rosenthal, the home of Clara Heimann-Rosenthal, who was deported and murdered in Theresienstadt in 1942. The *Association of the Friends of the Jewish Museum Hohenems* was established in 1986 and evolved to support the museum financially as well as creatively and practically. In 1987, two years after the municipality bought the villa, a thinktank was set up to discuss the possibility of creating a Jewish museum in Hohenems. The original idea had been to make everyday Jewish life and culture familiar and accessible again particularly to the non-Jewish population of an area where a Jewish community had once flourished for more than 300 years but where there was no Jewish life left. However, the focus shifted and the Jewish Museum Hohenems today mainly records the historical Jewish community in Hohenems, its diaspora and its various contributions to the history of Vorarlberg and Western Austria and surrounding regions from southern Germany to northern Italy, from Liechtenstein to Switzerland. The museum focuses on contemporary questions of Jewish life and culture in Europe, questions of living together and of migration, but it also deals with the end of the community in Hohenems, the regional Nazi history, antisemitism and the Holocaust. Its permanent exhibition documents the history of the Jewish community in Hohenems, which had existed for over three centuries until it was destroyed in 1941. The exhibition tells of new beginnings after 1945 and the life of the descendants of Jewish families from the region, as well as their connection to the town and the museum today. Along with these fragmented lines of regional and global history, the museum is devoted to the people, their experiences and their histories, and furthermore, it sustains a close relationship with the descendants of Hohenems' Jewish families around the world. | 2

In museums, history is mainly told through objects, artefacts, documents, photographs and art. Interpreting displayed objects, framing them within a certain narrative, i.e. by exhibition texts, arranges the objects into a representative whole – in line with the setting of the museum's purpose. Looking at the status of objects, it is quite evident that audio material such as interviews

and recordings has mostly been used to convey the characteristics of a certain period or event, or tell the background story of a particular object with the help of exhibition audio guides. Videos and recordings become secondary objects. In the Jewish Museum in Hohenems, for example, audio guides and video installations in German, English and French make the exhibition accessible to an international audience. They put individual experiences in the context of European networks, at the crossroads of Austria, Switzerland, Germany, and Liechtenstein. ¹³ However, the reason for using additional video and audio testimonies is related to the perspective they represent. Testimonies in general, audio and video, are insights into individual, and therefore subjective, perspectives of events, which become witnesses' personal stories of life experiences. ¹⁴ Testimonies in museums are shown in an individual, subjective context. However, using videotaped testimonies of victims of National Socialism seems even more difficult in Jewish museums, as one of their basic principles is not to guide visitors by morality and triggered emotions but to offer an objective, cognitive and informative approach to Jewish history. Nevertheless, in the last decade more and more museums have decided to integrate individual life stories in their exhibitions. Yet, although objects now tell the visitor about their personal context (their owner, former function, cultural setting, etc.), there are few videotaped testimonies in permanent exhibitions. Another reason why Jewish museums, even when they collect video testimonies of Holocaust survivors, do not display those videos in their permanent exhibitions is the actual perception of videos, their image and their effect – especially as permanent exhibits: videos are equivalent objects within museums' collections. They can be seen as art, read as historical sources, looked at like photographs and presented like artefacts. In the Jewish Museum Hohenems the curators decided to display objects with various narratives: as examples of the Jewish history of Hohenems, the general Jewish cultural cycle as well as personal stories. Yet, one main question about using videos as primary objects – with the same status as artefacts, photographs or documents – is their presentation: how and to what purpose can or should videos be presented?

A museum always offers various levels of perception, for example listening, watching, and space. The visitor decides which displayed objects he or she wants to look at or how to approach the various text levels of information (such as object texts, introductions and section texts, etc.) and whether to use an audio guide. All of these levels of perception can be combined in the museum space – except when it comes to videos. Videotaped testimonies with sound and subtitles demand the visitor's entire attention: watching, listening, and even reading the subtitles, which implies that many levels of perception must be focused on this one object. Consequently, it seems almost impossible to display videos on the same level (namely the primary showcases) with primary objects of other kinds. Placing video footage with audio tone in a showcase with other objects reverses the function of each of these objects. There is also a fine line between an intense experience and being overpowered by the moral authority of videotaped testimonies. Additionally, video footage may distract visitors from displayed objects, documents or photographs; while the urge to look around and observe those objects might also take away the needed attention for the video testimonies.

Looking at examples of Jewish museums, it becomes clear that video testimonies are used as single objects, but they are displayed separately. The setting for showing one or several videos or video testimonies is crucial for the appeal to, perception and patience of, and effect on the visitors. Most of the previously mentioned Jewish museums show video testimonies in a separate section, not in combination with other primary objects in showcases or enriched with texts. Often they use a comfortable setting, with benches or chairs, reduced light, headphones or open sound to create a more relaxing atmosphere. Here, visitors can enter and decide to stay or move on without the distraction of other objects. In two European Jewish museums video testimonies are not displayed separately, but they are still not on a same level of perception as other primary objects. In the *Auschwitz Jewish Centre* video testimonies frame their displayed objects, as the collection faces the fact that only a few objects were found to document and display the Jewish history in Oświęcim. In the *Jewish Museum* in London, only one video testimony is

displayed at the end of the Holocaust section. The concept in this section is the survival story of one specific person – shown in photographs, artefacts and documents – who tells his “story of survival” in the displayed interview. In both cases, the integration of the video testimonies is rather successful – in the sense that a large number of visitors take the time to take in the information in the shown video material. But as combining video installations and objects in a single spatial setting seems only to work well in a few cases, such as London and Oświęcim, it is necessary to have a closer look at the specific circumstances in each case. Spatial conditions, the size of the collections, accessible objects, conditions and quantity of video material, technical equipment, etc., give us a better understanding of why and how video installations have been used and why they may or may not be getting the visitors’ attention and time.

Video Testimonies in the Permanent Exhibition

In the Jewish Museum Hohenems, the curators Hanno Loewy and Hannes Sulzenbacher first faced the issue of if and how video testimonies of survivors and their stories of escape over the Rhine could be integrated in 2006–07, when the permanent exhibit was renewed. The videotaped interviews shown in the Jewish Museum Hohenems today are commissioned pieces, recorded, subtitled and edited by the museum for the new permanent exhibition. Those video testimonies are shown on the second floor of the main building, the Villa Heimann-Rosenthal, where Jewish life in Hohenems in the 20th century is displayed: the period of National Socialism in Austria on the left side and Jewish life in Hohenems after 1945 on the right. Video installations for both sections are set in separate, slightly darker rooms. The entrance to each room is embedded in a topic-related area of the permanent exhibition. The video footage on the right side of the museum shows testimonies of descendants of Jews from Hohenems, which are mostly not related to the period of National Socialism. They talk about their family history, the importance of Hohenems in their lives, reunions with other family members at the museum, etc. On the left side, the video installations are embedded in a section

dealing with the annexation of Austria by the Nazis in 1938 and the consequences for Austrian Jews. This section includes individual escape stories and stories of deported members of the Jewish community. Various kinds of documents, art, pictures, etc. are displayed in order to narrate these topics. The video installation offers three different perspectives on the escapes to Switzerland: testimonies of refugees and their escape stories; secondly, testimonies of locals who helped people fleeing across the border to Switzerland; and thirdly, testimonies of Swiss officials who were working on the border between 1938 and 1945. Both video sections are constructed identically: each room has two screens with two chairs in front of the screen and two sets of headphones. The visitors – if there is more than one in front of one screen – have to communicate and come to an agreement about which of the testimonies they want to watch. A console in between the chairs offers a choice of languages; and the option to switch between topic-related sections, or between different interviews or interview sections of the same interviewee. The installations demand attention as well as a certain level of communication from the visitors, an aspect that has been accepted well so far. In sum, the feedback has been quite satisfying. Visitors spend a large amount of their time in these video sections, watching the testimonies carefully and they are often surprised about the “different stories” and perspectives. Sometimes the displayed history – together with the testimonies – seems to offer new approaches to otherwise generally “known” historical facts and events.

Further Use of Videotaped Testimonies

In most Jewish museums and museums in general, video footage is often used as additional material for education programmes, such as lectures, workshops, etc. In fact, many Jewish museums have a collection of videotaped testimonies within their larger collections. As well as the above-mentioned video testimonies produced for its permanent exhibition, in 2007 the Jewish Museum Hohenems received more than 20 video interviews with survivors of the Nazi regime recorded in the mid-1990s in German, English, Hebrew, French and Spanish by the *USC Shoah Foundation* | 5. In February 2017 another

six video testimonies, in English and Hebrew, recorded by *Yad Vashem* between 1995 and 2014, were added to the museum's video collection.

All the interviewees from both sets of testimonies have one thing in common: they passed through Vorarlberg, in western Austria, at some point on their journey. Either they were on their way to Switzerland and trying to escape the NS-regime in Austria or they had survived the camps and were there as Displaced Persons until they emigrated to the USA, Israel or elsewhere in the late 1940 or early 1950s. Some of them had managed to survive under false, non-Jewish identities, mostly Polish, as "foreign" workers, in larger companies or in the mountains.

For more than a decade the educational staff of the Jewish Museum Hohenems has gathered ideas about how to use the video material; the museum recently decided to pursue three concepts on how to display the videos:

- firstly, a temporary exhibition in autumn 2018 focusing solely on videotaped testimonies;
- secondly, making video interviews accessible through different media terminals within the museum site to supplement the material already on display in the permanent exhibition;
- and thirdly, creating educational material specifically for workshops, seminars, etc., within the museum's educational programme.

1. *The eye of the needle* – concept for a temporary exhibition

Temporary exhibitions have a different approach to the challenges of displaying videotaped testimonies. The shorter duration and the freedom to experiment with material and technology depending on the specific narratives seem to make video installations more suitable for temporary exhibitions than for permanent ones.

Working with the video footage, the Jewish Museum Hohenems came up with several creative approaches, one being a temporary exhibition focusing specifically on the video testimonies given to the museum by the Shoah Foundation and Yad Vashem. It also further developed using video testimonies of victims of National Socialism as the main topic framing objects,

with as little additional biographical information or historical explanation as possible. This exhibition aims to emphasise the variety of ways people in the Vorarlberg region used to survive. As all the interviewees were in Vorarlberg at some point of their life, the region is regarded as “the eye of the needle”. Beside focusing on escape stories and survival in the camps, this exhibition will show stories about false identities, “foreign” workers and other ways of hiding during the Nazi period.

It will also emphasise the issue of “making” in the process of videoing: the construction of what is displayed, and how editing influences the function and purpose of video material, as well as the interview itself, i.e. the different agendas of interviewer and interviewee, the setting, the purpose of a series of interviews. The exhibition, planned for autumn 2018, will both look at the “making of videos” and scrutinise the consequent “making” of oral history, which includes the question of the dynamics and even “making” of memories. The museum’s approach is to respect the memory of the witnesses, but to challenge the concept of memory and “memorisation” of history in general – showing videotaped interviews of Holocaust survivors but also showing possible “disruptions” between memory and factual history within these testimonies. It attempts to tread the thin line, neither overpowering nor overwhelming visitors with the emotional depth or morality of the interviews. Visitors will instead be encouraged to be alert and attentive, as the aim is to make the examination of the videotaped testimonies into an interesting but educating experience.

2. Videos and visitor terminals

In addition to the permanent exhibition, two educational programmes – one about the escape to Switzerland between 1938 and 1945 and one about Jewish life in Vorarlberg after 1945 – will be enriched with video footage. To date, two terminals, one in the media room of the museum’s main building, another in the museum’s library, encourage visitors to engage more deeply with topics and stories displayed in the permanent exhibition. Several more interviews with survivors who did or did not escape to Switzerland between 1939 and

1945 can be watched, as well as several movies showing the development of the Jewish museum and the Jewish quarter since the 1990s. Videos of the reunions of descendants of Jews from Hohenems – which take place roughly every decade and represent the core outcome of the genealogical and archival work – give visitors the chance to explore a different side of the museum. Various videos and therefore various perspectives on a certain topic, such as escape, are uploaded on these terminal platforms, as well as an access forum for the museum's genealogy database and other collective archival databases.

The display of video interviews supplementing the material used in the permanent exhibition will be used to present longer excerpts of the individual stories, so offering more information on topics already addressed in the permanent exhibition. Future additional material will include interviews made by the museum or other institutions such as the USC Shoah Foundation and Yad Vashem, or short movies, etc. The footage will be cut into 10 maximum 20-minute sections. Additional text will describe the biographical background of the interviewee as well as the context of the excerpt – both in English and German with subtitles. And again, the terminals offer the option to select material from the above-mentioned categories in different languages and length.

3. Educational material

Additional interviews with survivors talking about their escape to Switzerland will also be used for educational purposes. This seems to be a common and over-all connecting function of video testimonies (or whole testimony collection) in Jewish museums.

The educational team at the Jewish Museum Hohenems focuses on providing schools, and other institutions that visit the museum in groups, with material in preparation for and post-processing of their museum visit. This includes text documents, photographs and maps, as well as carefully chosen and arranged video footage – if copyright allows reproduction. However, in a digital world, the idea is to avoid printed material as well as to choose a more

compact and more easily accessible output.

Group programmes will not be the only ones to benefit from the use of testimony footage; other types of educational events can also benefit from specifically edited material. In spring 2017 an event on the topic of “escape” included focus on three different escape stories narrated in interviews. The purpose was to show the variety of escape experiences. Participants were also guided through the museum and the Jewish quarter, where they learned about the history of Jews in Vorarlberg and how their lives changed after 1938. A subsequent guided tour was called “Refugee Trails”. On this tour the participants could visit specific spots along the Rhine river, where hundreds of Jewish refugees had escaped to Switzerland.

Workshops with different topics also call for different footage to underline the arguments. The variety of footage in the collection of the Jewish Museum Hohenems provides freedom to choose and create not only different types of stories but also different types of educational material. Instead of being focused on showing 10–15 minute interviews, educators can choose from a larger pool of material. The idea is to create different sets of educational materials, including videotaped interviews and audio sequences, as well as pictures and quotes from these interviews, which can be put together and shown in new combinations. The context of the various educational programmes leads the arrangement of the educational materials.

Conclusion

The use of video interviews, especially in the context of Jewish museums, is a challenge. Although it often does not seem suitable for the narrative of a permanent exhibition or seems rather experimental in the context of temporary exhibitions, difficult circumstances, i.e. a rare collection of non-digital objects, can encourage new approaches in the use of video installations – contextually as well as technologically. Generally, Jewish museums will have to rethink their content as well as their educational approaches towards the display of videotaped interviews of survivors, not only to change how testimonies are handled in permanent exhibitions but also to highlight the

potential of videotaped testimonies, especially when primary witnesses of the Holocaust are almost gone.

- 1 Information gathered in a topic-related group discussion with curators from various European Jewish Museums in the context of the Advanced Curatorial Education Programme, Izmir 2017, organised by the Association of European Jewish Museums.
- 2 <http://www.jm-hohenems.at/en/about/the-museum> accessed 14 March 2017.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Taubitz, Jan. (2016). *Holocaust Oral History und das lange Ende der Zeitzeugenschaft*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag. p. 29–36. Taubitz differs explicitly between the event and the memory of it; and shows in his study the challenges in dealing with witness interviews, especially in relation to the question of memories as historical sources.
- 5 Full Name: USC Shoah Foundation. The Institute for Visual History and Education