

**Refugee Voices:** **The AJR Audio-Visual Holocaust Testimony Archive**

**Holocaust Memorial Day 2018**

Dear Ladies and Gentleman,

My name is Bea Lewkowicz. I am the Director of the AJR Refugee Voices Archive. Thank you Michael for inviting me to speak today. The theme of this years’ HMD ‘the power of words’ resonates very strongly with my work with testimonies. Everyone who has the privilege to record a testimony and to work with testimonies knows about the power of words and the power of narratives and what impact they can have.

Words make and transmit memory. Words can change memorial landscapes, words counter other words and words can fill the void of silence.

My first experience with interviews was in Salonika in Greece during my doctoral fieldwork, a city whose large Jewish population was almost annihilated by the deportation and murder of almost 50.000 Jews. After the war around 1000 survivors came back from the camps, while another 1000 had survived in hiding or with the partisans in Greece. I had intended to write about Greek Jewish identity but when I came home and started reading the transcripts I developed a strong sense of historical responsibility towards the narratives of my informants. Through recording and listening to the life histories I became, in Dori Laub’s terms, “…party to the creation of knowledge de novo” (Laub 1995: 57) and the interviews changed their character, they became ‘testimonies’ and I became a witness. In these early interviews it is also evident how much the traumatic past shapes the present of the interviewees.

Lili Molho, who survived the German occupation in a monastery in Athens recalls:

‘My daughter thinks the sun is bright in Thessaloniki, she adores the sea and loves coming to Greece. I say, the sun is beautiful and I love the sea, but Greece is a terrible wound in my heart. Greece for me is the death of generations of people" (Lewkowicz 1994: 234).

To me these words are very powerful and they describe the feeling of a whole generation of Greek Jewish survivors. Thanks to her testimony, her words will not be forgotten.

Once I had finished my PhD, I started to collect more oral histories, for Belsize Square synagogue, for the Shoah Foundation and for the Continental Britons exhibition which I co-curated with Tony Grenville.

The response to the film - which we showed in the recreated Cosmo space was overwhelming. The impact of the film was noted by one visitor: ‘watching the video and walking round the exhibition was like **walking with history**’ (entry 23 July 2002, visitor’s book). This notion of ‘walking with history’, understanding ‘history from below’, which had also inspired the forefathers of the discipline of oral history in the seventies and eighties, made us create the AJR Refugee Voices Archive and I would like to thank the AJR for their wholehearted support and foresight. Between 2002 and 2008 we conducted 150 interviews and in 2015 we started to interview again and have added almost 70 interviews to the collection and there are still many people who would like to be interviewed. The testimonies give us a glimpse of how the interviewees look back on their lives and how they coped with the experiences of persecution, separation, loss, adaptation and settlement in the UK. Please go to the Wiener Library or the German Historical Institute in London or other institutions across the UK and listen to this amazing treasure trove of histories.

I have noticed a significant change between the first set and second set of interviews. As we now often interview child refugees, Kindertransportees, and child survivors, the testimony is also very much about the faith of the interviewees’ parents during and after the war. Sometimes interviewees had to reconstruct their parents history, as their foster parents did not tell them about their past. Other times, interviewees are in possession of valued letters and documents, giving their parents and siblings (who often did not survive) an important voice. Although I have conducted many interviews, I find these parental letters or written words in a book very moving and sometimes they move me to tears. One very poignant example of this is the case of Eva Mendelson, who I talked about this morning.

Eva, nee Eva Cohn in Gegenbach near Offenburg in Germany in 1931. She was deported from Freiburg in 1940 to Vichy France and interned with her mother and sister in Gurs and Rivesaltes. She was saved by OSE, Oeuvre de Secours Aux Enfants or Children’s Aid Society, taken to various children’s homes (in Château du Masgeliers) (1941-1942) and then to a convent in La Souterraine, Creuse) . At some point they were brought back to Camp Rivesaltes. In August 1942 an order was given to deport Eva, her mother, and her sister and all other Jews (first to Drancy and later to Auschwitz). OSE convinced Eva’s mother to leave the children behind and before she left, she gave a book of poetry to Eva and her sister, for Eva’s 11th birthday. At the end of interview, Eva reads from the little illustrated booklet. This poem by her mother certainly has a strong sense of foreboding.

Rivesaltes, 27 November 1942

*Und wenn sie Sonne golden scheint an Evchen Wiegenfeste, geht in den Garten treu vereint und lest, es ist das beste. Wisst dass sie Mutter lieb Euch hat und schickt Euch Ihren Segen und wenn Ihr wendet Blatt und Blatt wird sich die Heimat regen. Vergisst Sie nicht, vergisst Sie nicht, lasst Euch von Mutti sagen. Es war auch Freude und viel Leid in unseren alten Tagen*.

**And when the sun shines for Eva’s birthday, go to the garden und read, that is the best. Know that your mother loves you and is sending her blessings and when you turn page by page, your home/ your Heimat will emerge. Don’t forget her, don’t forget her, listen to your mother. There was also joy and so much suffering.**

By listening to Eva Mendelson’s interview and her reading of this poem, we also encounter her mother in Rivesaltes. The words in the small booklet are the only tangible link between Eva and her mother who did not survive. These words are now preserved in the interview.

Sometimes an interviewee does not have many photographs of a parent who did not survive and it is therefore even more important for him or her to tell the parent’s story. Example: Ursula Gilbert and her father Ferdinand Brann, who helped with the Kindertransport in Berlin). Sometimes an interviewee came to the UK with her his/her parents and wants to record the achievement of a parent (in the case of Liesl Kastner, whose mother Regine Kapeller-Adler was a Bio Chemist who invented an early chemical urine pregnancy test in Vienna, and was invited to join the then only pregnancy diagnosis laboratory in the whole of Great Britain, in Edinburgh and who managed to emigrate through the efforts of the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning

I think this illustrates that the interviews are not only testaments of the interviewees’ lives but also testaments of the people they choose to talk about in their interviews.

The sociologist Vieda Skultans calls the life histories ‘memorials’ to the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee but I would like to suggest that each testimony and each Refugee Voices interview is indeed a memorial, a memorial of words which invites the audience to listen, engage, and learn.

I have certainly learnt a great deal from all my interviews. I have learnt about very different experiences of persecution, uprooting, and loss. I have learnt about individual and communal help and resilience, I have learnt about the rebuilding of lives and the creation of new communities. Some words spoken by interviews are engrained on my mind, for example, I will never forget the wonderful quote from Norbert Brainin (later member of the Amadeus Quartet) who says:

**I am Viennese. I don't live in Vienna and I don't need to live in Vienna because the Vienna that I need I have right here, inside me"**

or the quote from an interview with Otto Deutsch, who came on a Kindertransport from Vienna:

**You live a normal life, but you never ever forget. You can’t forget. And I wouldn’t want to. Can I forgive? That’s difficult too. But life must go on.**

Another wonderful quote is taken from Gerti Baruch’s Stammbuch (autograph book) who came to the UK with her mother on a domestic visa. This was written by her teacher in 1936, filmed at the end of the interview.

**Die Erinnerung ist ein Paradies aus dem wir nicht vertrieben weden koennen**

**Memory is a paradise from which we cannot be banished. Memory is a paradise from which we cannot be banished.**

These are just a few examples on the lasting power of words in testimonies.

I hope that many people will listen to the words in the Refugee Voices Archive that we will collect more words from anyone who still would like to be interviewed and that these words will create a lasting legacy for the future.

Thank you!