Transcript: (Virtual) Future of Holocaust Remembrance – Audio Feature Digital Holocaust Remembrance

Part 1 – A theoretical outline: What is virtual memory culture?

How have YOU gained your knowledge of the Holocaust? You have probably listened to the testimonies of contemporary witnesses at your school, you may have participated in commemoration events in your town or visited memorials for concentration camps, museums, or exhibitions. But how can this be continued amid a global pandemic? How can we remember the atrocities of the Holocaust in times of Covid-19 and what role does social media play in this context?

My name is David, I study English and Politics at the University of Würzburg and for the following 30 minutes, I will examine the Virtual Future of Remembering the Holocaust.

Between the years 1941 and 1945, more than 6 million people were industrially murdered – just because their mere existence did not fit into a certain ideology. For more than 70 years now, society has been looking for ways to restore the dignity of the victims, to preserve the knowledge and the testimonies and to pass them on to future generations. To do that, people have always used state of the art media formats – for example feature films about the atrocities or video recordings of victims' testimonies. And now – and especially since the beginning of the pandemic – I think the time has come to discuss the role of digital media in commemorating this genocide.

The usage of digital media in Holocaust education has, in fact, not been a product of the pandemic. A ground-breaking example is the project "Dimensions in Testimony", which premiered in 2015. It was initiated by the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. As the project's website says,

[male speaker]

"[it] enables people to ask questions that prompt real-time responses from pre-recorded video interviews with Holocaust survivors and other witnesses to genocide. The pioneering project integrates advanced filming techniques, specialized display technologies and next generation natural language processing to create an interactive biography." (USC Shoah Foundation)

So, in short: A hologram and computer software simulate a conversation with a survivor using thousands of pre-recorded videos.

All in all, Virtual Media still have only played a minor role before the pandemic. Mobile Apps in Concentration Camp memorials for example have existed, but mostly, they have only been subordinate to an analog exhibition (Knoch 24). Also, the ground-breaking hologram project "Dimensions in Testimony", for instance, is bound to a physical site and not accessible online or part of social media.

Another example: Selfies of memorials on social media platforms have been criticized for 'crossing ethical red lines'. This superficial argument has prevented a constructive and structural debate about the future relationship between our Culture of Remembrance and Digitization. Moreover, we must keep in mind that the basic ethical rules for Holocaust education in mass media were laid down in the 1970s, as the German historian Habbo Knoch remarks. Back then, the formats and possibilities of media were totally different. (Knoch 17)

So, I tried to approach the topic as impartially as possible, and my first step was to find out where Virtual Holocaust Commemoration started.

[female speaker]

You have likely seen the movie "Schindler's List". In preparation for making the movie, director Steven Spielberg and his team met with more than one hundred Holocaust survivors saved by Oskar Schindler. At first, Spielberg considered shooting a documentary about them, but then decided to go a different

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route: Between 1994 and 2000, the newly founded "Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation" has recorded more than fifty-one thousand interviews with survivors and other eyewitnesses of the Holocaust in fifty-six countries. What was created was the "Visual History Archive". (cf. Shandler 10)

By the way, the hologram project I just talked about is a successor project to the Visual History Archive. Never before has there been any video documentation with so many interviewees, such high-quality standards and such international orientation – which makes the Visual History Archive a pioneer project in Virtual Holocaust Commemoration.

Since then, digitization has proceeded even further and has arrived in all parts of our lives and lead to the development of many more digital Remembrance projects. They reach from online seminars to digital memorials, documentations and simulated Social-Media profiles of Holocaust victims or online archives, but also involve the social media activity of individual users.

Digitization offers new opportunities for institutions when it comes to archiving, collecting, and distributing information. The fact that the information is accessible online and not physically limited makes the audience a truly global one (cf. Hogervorst 170).

Amit Pinchevski, Professor in Communication at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, remarks

[female speaker]

"Testimony extends beyond documentation and preservation; it is now increasingly about connection and dialogue" (Pinchevski in Ebbrecht-Hartmann 5).

Also, from my personal experience, I can say that hearing about facts and figures from teachers, historians and professors is just not enough for me and my generation to grasp the significance and brutality of the Holocaust. It has always been necessary to get "the evidence to speak" as the historian Alexandra Garbarini (Garbarini in Shandler 44) puts it. This means to engage with the testimonies of survivors and individual biographies and not just mere numbers. But what to do when the survivors have passed away? Online Archives and other digital tools can help us here to engage with survivors, even if they are not physically with us.

We are in the "era of the user", as the Dutch Historian Susan Hogervorst calls it.

As an example, you could take online archives and platforms with recorded testimonies from survivors, which are often fully searchable, and thus put the user in the focus. He or she can choose what to watch, read or listen to and that creates a certain type of interaction and emotional involvement, as Hogervorst argues (cf. Hogervorst 171f.).

But even more is possible in the "era of the user": He or she can edit, share and comment the testimonies, documents, pictures, etc. more easily than ever before using social media platforms.

As you can see, it is not enough just to archive and digitize interviews, pictures, and documents. Holocaust Remembrance requires active engagement – in analogue and virtual spaces: Self-reflecting, sharing, being creative, discussing with others – that is what needs to be done to uphold the memory even when the survivors are gone (Hogervorst 173).

We will see how this active engagement can be achieved in virtual spaces in the interviews in the following two parts of this podcast.

With remembrance online comes a shift of authority over historical narration. Traditionally, the public audience was rather passive and left the narration and the interpretation of historical content to experts and institutions, while in the digital age everybody can create and circulate Holocaust-related content (cf. Megan Lundrigan 641).

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This development also poses a threat because it is now very easy for Populists, Holocaust Deniers and Anti-Democrats to misrepresent the facts for their political purposes and circulate them among a global audience (cf. Lundrigan 641). We see for example that Holocaust Denial is an everyday topic on social media (cf. Klein The Conversation).

Let's take the 360°-VR-walk "Inside Auschwitz" by the Westdeutscher Rundfunk as an example: (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EOM_CxAKB_Y). Users can virtually visit the Auschwitz memorial and simultaneously hear the stories of three survivors – without having to leave their own four walls. Users are in "Virtual historical environments" as German Professor Katrin Biebighäuser calls them. The problem is the following: the places you see on your screen are not the original places, there is no guarantee that the depicted information is valid (cf. Biebighäuser 75). Wrong appraisals and value judgements that are not based on facts can occur if the user does not bear a critical distance to those products. (Biebighäuser 79).

Other critics claim that digitization brings about distraction rather than attention and that it commercializes history. Moreover, many critics consider digital technology in Holocaust Remembrance not only as unethical, but as superfluous in the view of the authenticity of the real remains, as Historian Habbo Knoch sums up (cf. Knoch 17).

Part 2 – Remembrance on Social Media within the dynamics of the pandemic: Interview with Dr. Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann

David Schiepek:

Until now, we have mainly talked about large-scale institutional projects such as digitized archives or virtual monuments, but what about the platforms we all associate with digitization. What about Social Media platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter or even TikTok? I met with Dr. Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann to discuss that question. He is a Media and Film Scholar at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and an expert for virtual Holocaust commemoration.

Thank you, Tobias, for being here.

Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann:

Thank you for inviting me.

David Schiepek:

In one of your essays, you were writing that before the pandemic, institutions and memorials offered flagship projects – like for example holograms or learning stations with iPads, but overall, the institutions had not gone digital.

So, what has changed since the lockdown? How did the institutions and memorials react to the pandemic?

Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann:

The Holocaust memorials and museums needed to find new ways how to continue communicating with our audience so to say. Spring 2020, when the lockdown started in Europe and worldwide was also the 75th anniversary of the liberation of concentration camps in Germany and all the memorials for instance had planned huge celebrations, huge commemoration ceremonies and invited also survivors and liberators of their families and all of this was suddenly not possible anymore. So, they had to find new ways how to communicate with the public.

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And you're totally right. There were great and very innovative initiatives concerning the digitization of Holocaust memory before, but Holocaust institutions were hesitant to use to a full scale the interactive potential of social media. What the institutions did before Covid was mainly to broadcast their content like in classical media like television. With the pandemic, social media became the easiest way to stay in contact with the audiences that were now also kind of remote and to, so to say, offer access to the historical sites and also to the collections of the museums.

David Schiepek:

On social media, now anyone can now edit, comment, reproduce, and redistribute media themselves. Do you think this will also have an impact on what Holocaust institutions offer on social media?

Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann:

Definitely. As I said before: When we look at how social media was used before the pandemic by those institutions it was mainly just to upload content of course to foster engagement in the sense that people should look at it, share it, but there were no real kind of participatory elements built in.

"Eva.Stories" was the first step – so this Instagram stories project – was the first step towards really using also the aesthetics and the logics of social media and especially of a visual platform like Instagram and also this kind of fragmented structure of the stories on Instagram and also this idea of how to trans-late historical documents like diaries into formats that correspond with today's social media use. And now, we have in Germany also the "Ich bin Sophie Scholl"-project on Instagram which is of course even going further into the direction of interaction and in that case, Sophie Scholl, the kind of virtual Sophie Scholl, is even kind of communicating and responding to users.

David Schiepek:

In your essay "Commemorating from a distance" from 2020, you identified three dimensions of digital memory that emerged in the pandemic: Transferring, transitioning, and transforming. Can you explain them very briefly? Perhaps start with transferring.

Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann:

It was really interesting to see that these formats in a way were not completely detached from the former logics of mediating the Holocaust in other, in analog media and that we really saw a form of translating these quite established forms into the language so to say of digital media.

And these three dimensions or modes describe a little bit the way how the analog forms and the digital forms are connected.

So, when I am speaking of transferring Holocaust memory into the digital world, then it means that very established and useful practices – even rituals – which we know from analog Holocaust commemoration are more or less kind of just transferred into digital logics by using the same setting and the same ap-proach just using digital media and digital platforms in order to disseminate it.

The examples I'm referring to here is for example online discussions or online conversations with Holo-caust survivors: So, you have a setting which we know from schools or from visits in museums and me-morials that you sit together with a survivor and he or she tells his and her story and you can ask ques-tions and this was just transferred to Zoom, for example.

David Schiepek:

So, some formats – as we have heard – have been transferred exactly one-to-one to social media. In your essay, however, you also write about the transitioning of Holocaust remembrance, that means, the

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development of formats that are more adapted to the conditions and logic of social media. Can you give an example and describe this in more detail?

Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann:

So, we had for example a very interesting project launched by Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust memorial during Israel's Holocaust Memorial Day in 2020, which was called "#remembering-fromhome/#shoahnames". It was two hashtags which they launched.

So, they asked people: 'Send us videos where you kind of commemorate the victims of the Holocaust by saying their names and then upload those videos with the hashtags #rememberingfromhome and #shoahvictims.' And then, Yad Vashem could identify these contributions and add all of them to a virtual name reading. Because the reading of names is a very common and very established format of commemorating the Holocaust, the victims of the Holocaust. Usually it is made physically, so you are standing at a site and people are reading the names loud.

And now? How can you do it in times of a pandemic? You have to find new ways, remote ways. And that was a fascinating way not just to read the names or to present the names but also to involve the audience.

By the help of these hashtags – and the hashtags are of cause also very much part of the digital logics of social media platforms … The Hashtags connected all these dispersed videos and created so to say a space for commemoration – a digital space for commemoration and offered also then the way of course to combine all these things in another new digital video that was then shared by Yad Vashem through their social media platforms.

And this is already kind of shifting into what I describe as transforming Holocaust memory, which would really integrate the basic approaches of Holocaust memory and education with the specific forms of addressing and involving the users on social media platforms.

And we had in spring 2021 a trending Hashtag especially in this field of Holocaust commemoration, which was #75liberation. It was first made public and used some days before international Holocaust memory day on 27th of January 2020. And so, this hashtag really created something similar like a virtual commemorative space or a virtual memorial that completely integrated Holocaust commemoration and social media practices.

David Schiepek:

So, you have said that the idea of remembering on social media and using hashtags has not just been around since the pandemic but has been used before. Do you think that this forced shift now to digital communication from one day to the next will have long-term impact on how we use digital and social media for Holocaust remembrance?

Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann:

So, I think what the pandemic showed is the importance of the physical site and that we really need them, that we cannot compensate them with digital or other media. But on the other hand, this forced encounter and adoption of social media and other digital media formats, I think was something that enriched Holocaust commemoration and made it more innovative and effective and also created new forms of engagement and reached out to other users or potential audiences.

But this will be an addition. This will be something that needs to be combined with the personal visit, with the personal encounter with the sites and that's why I think we are really moving into the direction of what I would call the hybrid memorial: Memorial sites were anyways always multimodal in the sense

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that it is not the pure physical space and not only the landscape, but the landscape was always augmented by additional media.

It started already when monuments were put on the grounds of the former concentration camps or when an exhibition was built. This is already an augmentation of the space, or when a guide is doing a tour, this is already an augmentation. And I think what we will see is an increase in using digital technology in order to augment the historical places and also the museum exhibitions in order to offer more layers of information, of engagement, offer possible encounter with the historical sources, with the voices of the victims and so on.

David Schiepek:

And do you think that this role of the individual as a user and also as a producer and the individual engagement via social media platform will also be that strong when we will be on-site again and see the witnesses in person again?

Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann:

Actually, we have to say that happened already before. What I really hope is that this is better synchronized.

There were a lot of controversies long before the pandemic about 'Is it appropriate to make selfies on a concentration camp memorial site?' Many scholars really found out that this is a very serious way of visitors to engage with the site and also to engage with the memory. They are trying to find ways how to inscribe the memory of the Holocaust in their present lives. And part of our present lives, or our timelines on the social media platforms – they are the documentation of our lives.

Now I hope that both of these practices will be better synchronized. So that on the one hand, memorials of course continue creating access online by the help also of social media with the help of digital video and photography and on the other hand users and visitors get kind of best-practice-examples and models how to use this technology.

David Schiepek:

Thank you really much for being here, Tobias. Thank you for your very interesting and insightful answers.

Tobias Ebbrecht-Hartmann:

Thank you very much. It was a great conversation.

Part 3 – Field trip to the Arolsen Archives. The digitization of an institution: Interview with Dr. Christian Höschler

David Schiepek:

The podcast is called "(Virtual) Future of Holocaust Remembrance", but we have already seen in the many examples that virtual remembrance is not a distant vision of the future at all, we are already in the middle of the digital age.

The Arolsen Archives is an international organization based in Germany that went digital at a very early stage. I'm joined now by Dr. Christian Höschler, who has been Deputy Head of the Research and Education Department at the Arolsen Archives since 2017.

Dr. Höschler, thank you very much for taking the time. Why don't you start by telling us something about the history of the Arolsen Archives?

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Christian Höschler:

O.K. sure. I'll try to keep it brief, but we do need to elaborate a bit on the historical side of things so that we all understand where our subsequent discussion fits into. So, the Arolsen Archives were founded as the so called "International Tracing Service" after World War II. The original task of the organization really is in its original name: We were established as a tracing service to find missing victims of the Nazis after the war. Because in millions of cases the exact circumstances of their persecution were unclear, as well as the fundamental question whether they had even survived. So, as a first step, the allies had to gather information about those who had been deported, incarcerated and in many cases murdered by the Nazis. These were individuals who had been taken to concentration and extermination camps, who had been exploited as forced laborers, persecuted for racial reasons or because of their lifestyle, their sexual orientation or for religious reasons. So, in order to clarify their fates, the allies established this tracing service in central Germany in a small town called Bad Arolsen. And here, the allies brought together millions of records that they were able to secure at the end of the war.

This included Nazi registration files for individual concentration camp prisoners from the former camps, identification documents for forced laborers, for instance from the Soviet Union, and also records that the allies and relief agencies created after the war in order to register the survivors who were now collectively referred to as so called "displaced persons" or "DPs" and with all these different documents, the allies were able to both establish what had happened to many of these individuals and also very importantly to provide this information to relatives and friends who were searching for individuals by submitting tracing inquiries to the allies.

And so really this tracing work was the main purpose of our organization for many years, and it was only in the early 2000s that we made it possible on a larger scale to allow for other uses of our documents including researchers, journalists and educators being able to access our collections and to work with our documents for the sake of historical documentation, educational projects, media coverage and so on. So, that's our history in a nutshell.

David Schiepek:

Do you still receive tracing inquiries nowadays?

Christian Höschler:

Yes. So, even while we are no longer called "International Tracing Service" – we actually changed our name to "Arolsen Archives" in 2019, we still receive roughly 20.000 inquiries per year. Not all of these inquiries are from relatives, we also have a growing number of inquiries from professionals such as historians or educators, but in total there's still 20.000 inquiries that we process each and every year.

David Schiepek:

You have just mentioned that 2019, so only two years ago, you have changed your name and also with a brief look at your website one can say that you do not only trace victims or archive documents, but you also develop educational and commemorative content which is specifically developed for online and virtual spaces. So, my question is: When and why did you decide to go digital?

Christian Höschler:

That's a great question! So, the digitization of the collection started in the late 1990s and up until today we have scanned approximately 85% of our documents, which is a rather high proportion actually. And the initial goal really was to speed up the process of handling tracing inquiries.

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But of course, today, digitizing the collections serves many different purposes, some of which you have already mentioned. One example is the online archive of the Arolsen Archives that allows anyone, anywhere in the world, to search our collections on their personal computers. So, they don't have to come and visit our reading room in Bad Arolsen. And there are plenty of other benefits to digitization including the fact that when you digitize an archive, you also protect the archive. Not just because you have a digital backup of the physical documents, but there's also less need to put wear and tear on the documents so to speak by taking them out of storage and handling them because after all, these are rather fragile documents by now and they're getting older by the minute.

David Schiepek:

I just mentioned that you release educational and commemorative projects which have a broader audience. Can you explain your didactic and pedagogic motivation behind such projects?

Christian Höschler:

Sure. So, we have created all kinds of educational materials over the years, including classroom materials which are based on selected documents from our collections. The goal is to allow students to learn about the history of the Holocaust and Nazi persecution in general on the basis of authentic historical source material.

And then we have projects that are more on the commemorative side of things as you have already pointed out. These are more open to the general public, and anyone interested in remembering the victims of the Nazis. One example is our initiative "#everynamecounts", which we launched in early 2020. This what we call a crowdsourcing or citizen-science-project. The goal is to create a digital memorial to those persecuted by the Nazis. And we do this by allowing volunteers to transcribe the names of individual Nazi victims as well as other information from the scanned document that we keep in our archive into an online tool.

So, it means that in a way, we are involving our user community in a process that is really at the core of the archival work we do and that's really exciting and also an innovative way of doing things.

David Schiepek:

I have also digitized a document myself in the online application when I was preparing for the interview. I find #everynamecounts very interesting because it gives users the opportunity to engage with real biographies and real people. It makes this so difficult to understand and dark period of our history so personal and tangible. But my question is, however, how has the public reacted to the project?

Christian Höschler:

First of all, thank you very much for joining the initiative and I think you have really identified what is the appeal about it for many people.

We initially thought it would be interesting to just go ahead and try something like this also because we have never done this kind of crowdsourcing project, but none of us at the Arolsen Archives anticipated just how strong a resonance this would generate. So many people who previously had never heard about us were now joining the #everynamecounts-Initiative and started transcribing all this information from our documents.

So, maybe just to give you some numbers: We have had more than 20,000 registered volunteers and they've done well of a 4 million transcriptions for the documents that we uploaded for "#everynamecounts".

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And we've also had plenty of media coverage and support from public figures, politicians, and others. So, there's been this very dynamic and somewhat unexpected surge of interest and participation which is great, and at the same time it is also in the best sense a challenge for us because every day, we're learning more about the advantages of crowdsourcing activities. And one of those advantages is also to partner-up with other institutions who keep similar collections like we do. So, for example we have started some cooperation projects with individual concentration camp memorial sites in the context of "#everynamecounts", meaning that documents that they have in their collections …

We include these documents in our #everynamecounts activities, meaning it's not just our documents that are getting transcribed, it is also documents from other sources, from other places, but of course they are all relevant to this history of Nazi persecution.

And so, I think, bringing together not just volunteers and people for this kind of work, but also networking amongst different institutions and sort of trying to integrate all these different collections is just a wonderful thing and we're really happy with the way that's going.

David Schiepek:

And how do you see the future of the Arolsen Archives and also how do you see the future relationship between Holocaust remembrance and virtual spaces?

Christian Höschler:

I think the Arolsen Archives in a way are really at the crossroads right now. So, for the first time we are really building a community online in which we are not just providing access to our cultural heritage, but we're truly sharing it with the world. We hope to do this in a way that enables people to embrace this heritage and contribute to it through their volunteering, for instance in the context of "#everynamecounts". And in a way, by doing so, they make it their own, creating the sense that we are all responsible that the crimes committed by the Nazis are never forgotten and also that we must always remember the victims and the ordeal they had to endure. So that we can try to learn from these experiences and also reflect on the question of whether these are relevant to our own day and age and if so, in what way. And I think the digital element to all of this is crucial. Not only is the world becoming more and more digital and we have seen this trend accelerate of course during the Covid-19-pandemic, but there's also the sad fact that the survivors of Nazi persecution themselves will not be with us much longer, we have touched upon this already. So, one of the more tangible elements of testimony and commemoration will fade away. And I think this means we have to think about how we can respond to this, how we can keep the memory alive and how we can keep this history relevant for future generations. I'd say that's not just a task for the Arolsen Archives, but for society as a whole when it comes to the future of remembrance.

David Schiepek:

Wow! Many thanks dear Mr. Höschler for the very exciting interview and the insights you gave us into the Arolsen Archives.

Christian Höschler:

Well thanks for having me. It's been a pleasure and I wish you all the best with your podcast.

Sum-Up + Own Opinion

My own opinion: Of course, there are projects that cross "ethical red lines", for example virtual tours of Auschwitz which do not offer information or contextualization and pursue a mere optical-sensual and

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fascinating approach. Therefore, there already exists a broad consensus that digital media must not aim at creating an emotional spectacle in cinematic surroundings (Ebbrecht-Hartmann in Knoch 32).

But rejecting every digital project – just because it is set in a virtual space and not following traditional rules and concepts is also wrong, I think. In the end, we are bound to find new ways to commemorate the Holocaust when we will soon have no access to witnesses anymore, when the atrocities and the totalitarianism are more and more intangible and unimaginable for young people and when denial and relativization of the Holocaust are growing problems (cf. Klein). In my own opinion, Remembrance has to take place in our reality – of which the virtual space today is a large part of as well.

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