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Visual Histories: Recording, Preserving and Disseminating and Analyzing Deaf Stories

PATRICIA DURR

BORROWING A TRADITION ESTABLISHED BY DR. PADDY LADD OF HONORING a Deaf individual before presenting, I have selected to honor Meta Noveck. Meta was a Deaf Jewish survivor whom I was blessed to meet for a few hours during the late 1980s when Lexington School for the Deaf invited her to share her experiences in concentration camps during WWII. It was through talking to Meta about her experiences that I came to realize that I had always looked at the Holocaust largely through the male dominant lens and always from a hearing lens. I had never been introduced to or really considered what a Deaf woman's experience must have been like during this time. I am most grateful to Meta for having shared her story and for tugging at my heartstrings over the years. She inspired me to write a paper later in her honor.

The primary purpose of this paper is to promote the importance of visual testimonies for Deaf cultural studies programs. With the advent of videotaping technology, oral testimonies have now begun to be referred to visual testimonies and are ideal for capturing the stories of Deaf people who use sign language. Ethnographic studies are a very important part of understanding people and their cultures yet appears to be a somewhat underutilized field of study within Deaf cultural studies. Presently, visual testimonies with Deaf interviewees tend to be largely used for sign language linguistic analysis and they have not been explored for historical, social and political understandings.

The chief values in conducting Deaf visual testimonies are that they afford for the documenting, preserving, and disseminating of these materials, which in turn enrich our understanding of Deaf history, Deaf culture, and the Deaf perspective via analysis of these works.

THE FIRST VISUAL HISTORIES

The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) Motion Picture Project under the stewardship of Roy Stewart and leadership of George W. Veditz recognized the importance of the medium of film to preserve sign language and Deaf history and raised \$5,000 in donations for this aim. In 1910 at the Ninth Convention of the NAD and the Third World's Congress of the Deaf, Veditz stated, "We possess and jealously guard a language different and apart from any other in common use: a language which nevertheless is precisely what all-wise Mother Nature designed for the people of the eye, a language with no fixed form or literature in the past, but which we are now striving to fix and give a distinct literature of its own by means of the moving picture film." From 1910 to 1920, the NAD filmed several Deaf and Hearing individuals attending a convention and signing speeches, addresses, sermons, jokes, poetry, and a song. The most famous of them all is Veditz's 1913 "Preservation of Sign Language," in which he proclaims sign language as the "noblest gift God has given us deaf people," and emphasizes the importance of film in preserving ASL and Deaf culture (see figure 1).



Figure 1. George Veditz, NAD "Preservation of Sign Language" 1913. "A-s l-o-n-g a-s we have deaf people on the earth, we will have signs and a-s l-o-n-g a-s we have our f-i-l-m-s, we will be able to p-r-e-s-e-r-v-e our beautiful sign language in its original p-u-r-i-t-y. It is my hope that we all will cherish and defend our beautiful s-i-g-n l-a-n-g-u-a-g-e a-s t-h-e n-o-b-l-e-s-t g-i-f-t God has given us deaf people."



Figure 2. Dr. John Hotchkiss NAD "Memories of Old Harford" 1913.

The oldest known Deaf visual history produced in the U.S. is Dr. John Hotchkiss' "Memories of Old Hartford" (see figure 2). This testimony is sadly often overlooked and undervalued, but it is rich with texture, details, and great spirit. The two excerpts pay homage to Laurent Clerc, the founder

of the American School for the Deaf with Thomas Gallaudet. The first quote explains Clerc's bilingual method of instruction which he brought with him from France and the second details his humble wish. More than just a moving document to be analyzed for language use in that time period, this visual history tells us much about our ancestors, our educational legacy, our cultural values and beliefs, our norms of behavior, our traditions and possessions and artifacts; in short it is a treasure trove filled with Deaf cultural information waiting to be unlocked and appreciated to the fullest within the field of ethnographic and Deaf cultural studies.

Excerpts from of Dr. John Hotchkiss' "Memories of Old Hartford" (1913)

"He told us of the significance of literacy, grammar, and word order. He selected two sentences to demonstrate this. The first, which he fingerspelled completely was, "We live to eat" and the other was "We eat to live."

And with his very elegant and grandiose signing (and some what lengthy delivery), he explained the difference with great preciseness and clarity.

We children could clearly see how different the meaning was based on a simple verb change by switching the terms "live" and "eat."

(Hotchkiss imitating Clerc's signing style)

"I, you and you and you, we do not live solely to feast upon food and eat and eat. No, not at all. We live for better things than that. But it is true that each of us must eat in order to give us fortitude and good health to enable us to live and do good." ...

"Another time, Clerc was admiring the monument that Deaf people throughout America had paid for to be made in honor of Thomas Gallaudet, which you yourselves over the past few month have been contributing to have restored to its original luster. While Clerc was studying this monument, a few boys happened upon him and asked, 'will there be such a tribute in your honor some day in the future?' to which Clerc replied, "oh, I don't know, perhaps.' "On what spot would you want such a monument to be set?" a boy asked. Clerc answered, 'well, I don't know but I think I would like it right there. It would be fitting if it were along side Gallaudet's as I was his colleague and friend throughout life. So too should the two statues stand side by side keeping us united even after death.' And so after a few years passed, the Deaf people of this nation gathered up \$3,000 to pay for a platform and bronze bust of Clerc to be erected in the very place he, himself, had selected several years before."

This precious testimony has a wealth of material, knowledge, and cultural values to be discovered and examined within the field of Deaf cultural studies and ethnographic studies. Thankfully NAD realized and capitalized on the value and importance of film in order to record Deaf people's lives and stories much as the tape recorders helped to document and preserve

spoken languages with no written form. However, it is unfortunate that the Motion Picture Project was not sustained or resurrected after 1920.

DEAF SURVIVORS OF WORLD WAR II

Fortunately other institutions have recognized the importance of Deaf testimonies, especially those relating to World War II. The USC Shoah Foundation Institute has over 52,000 videotaped interviews, of which five are of Deaf survivors and one is of a hearing woman with Mother-Father Deaf (CODA). Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Israel, has conducted several visual testimonies with Deaf survivors and two are available on line with Hebrew voice over and English captions. NTID/RIT and Gallaudet University have done several interviews with Deaf survivors. These testimonies are captioned and up on the NTID/RIT website at www.rit.edu/deafww2 (see figure 3) under videos. The Yale Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies holds more than 4,300 interviews of survivors; of these, ten were of Deaf survivors and one hearing woman who had Mother-Father-Sister Deaf. (Text summaries of these interviews are available at the website above. For a detailed bibliography of books, articles, and videotapes about Deaf people and WW II, visit RIT's Librarian Joan Naturale's bibliography listing at: <http://wally.rit.edu/pubs/guides/deafwartestimonies.htm>.)

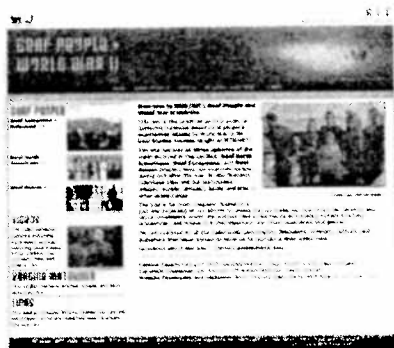


Figure 3: Screen from www.rit.edu/deafww2



Figure 4: Ingelore Honigstein as a youth

Unfortunately it is feared that a great many visual testimonies recorded by family members, lay people or organizations have been lost, misplaced, or overlooked. Furthermore, there is a significant problem in gaining access to some visual testimonies, as some interviewers prefer to keep the materials to themselves. The RIT Wallace Memorial Library has been amassing the materials above into one centralized collection to help facilitate the sharing and use of these valuable Deaf related visual histories.

In order to illustrate the power of Deaf visual testimonies several excerpts were shared during the Deaf Studies Today 2008 conference presentation. It should be noted that all of the quotes below are translations from the testimonies, which were given in American Sign Language by survivors who learned ASL later in life, and do not fully or adequately represent the original message and delivery. In cases where the voice interpretation does not accurately reflect the original message, I have taken the liberty of correcting the text to match the signed testimony. Hopefully, you will be able to spend some time with the visual testimonies by watching the ones we have on-line at the www.rit.edu/deafww2 site and/or by going to the RIT Deaf Studies Archives in the Wallace Memorial Library.

INGELORE'S STORY

Ingelore Honigstein (see figure 4) is a vibrant Deaf German woman who shared a personal and brutal sexual attack she experience at the hands of two Nazi youth:

"One day the streetcar was running late, very late, and I was not supposed to get back to my school after eight in the evening. I walked very quietly up the street. Two Nazi youth, military students from the academy nearby, came up behind me. They grabbed hold of me and took me to their room and there they raped me repeatedly. The first one told me exactly what he wanted me to do and that I had to do everything he wanted and then the second one did the same. I screamed and they clasped their hands over my mouth and told me not to make any noise. I suffered horribly. I had so much blood all over my legs, trickling down. It was terrible. I could not even walk. It was terrible, horrible pain I was experiencing. That happened when I was already 15 years old. It was just at the beginning of December.

I went back to the school, but they would not open the door for me. They refused. I pounded and pounded. I said, "It's Ingelore, let me in. Please open the door." All the lights were out and the building was dark. Finally, the door opened and I was allowed to come in. The door closed behind me and the caretaker saw all the blood all over me. She took care of me and cleaned my up and she said, "What happened to you?" I explained everything to her and I said, "I do not want to go back to that house. I do not want to go back to that job again.

When I was healed, it was time for Christmas vacation so I took a train back home. I was going to stay there for a while and then come back to school the same way. I got to my house and my mother looked at me and she knew immediately that something was wrong. I was not smiling. I had become very serious. It is as if I aged and became older, but my mother never knew what had happened to me. I was ashamed to tell her.”

Ingelore then goes on to chronicle her immigration to the U.S. with her parents, discovery of the pregnancy that results from the attack at the age of 16 and her subsequent abortion. The full testimony of Ingelore as well as her hearing son, Frank Stiefel, are available at www.rit.edu/deafww2 under video and NTID. Her son is now in the process of making a documentary of Ingelore’s story.

DORIS’ STORY

Doris Fedrid is another Deaf Polish survivor, which NTID interviewed. Doris grew up Deaf and became blind later in life after the war. She hid in over twenty hiding places during the war and was in a ghetto as well as a labor camp. One of the excerpts shared during the presentation discussed the type of work details she experienced.

“During the war, I had had a bad back. A doctor later told me the cause was from all the stooping I did washing clothes. I would do this work the entire day. I remember my knuckles would swell terribly, but I had to do it. In Germany, they would use double the soap and back then we did not have gloves. All of the women who worked this job had the same problems with their hands. My mother was very worried about me. My father stole butter from his work and I would use the butter on my hands to help soften them and make them feel better. It did help. I would also leave them wrapped in cloth.

(Interviewer – What type of work / wash were you doing?) I washed uniforms. We would use the soap and scrub them on the washboards to get them clean. That was before washing machines were invented. Now you can just pour the soap in the machine and it does all the work for you. It is so easy now. Back then, we had these big bars of soap that we used. Do you know what that soap was made out of, Jewish people?”

Doris’s testimony is rich with detail and meaning. Her facial expression, body language, and words emphasize the hardship and terror of the times in which she lived. One powerful example being when she shares how her mother prepared for the worst:

My mom actually had poison that she held on to. I remember seeing it. It was a dark color, it was black. She always kept it with her in case they every

caught us. She would take it and then it would be over. It was in case the Nazis came to kill us, we’d take the poison and die peacefully and quietly.

Several short excerpts were shared regarding Doris’ hiding places. Her hearing parents had hidden her over twenty-two times. Below she describes a very tight spot-hiding place in which she had to be alone due to the size limit:

“Well actually, when you opened the bathroom door there was an area right behind that door and it was like a vent. Here I will show you with the paper what it looked like. This is what it looked like and the door would shut on top of this. It was a very small space. I slid in on my back face first with my arms in front of me. It was not good. I only hid there once. It was very uncomfortable and hard to get out of. It was one of the worse hiding spaces and I stayed there all day. There was no light whatsoever. It was completely in the dark. No food. No way to use the toilet. I just mostly slept and waited.

I remember I could feel people walking around inside. It was the Nazi army stamping around. I could feel them searching the house. It was very scary. I’ll never forget this...”



Figure 5: Doris Fedrid

There was always constant fear of the round ups in the Lviv ghetto. Here Doris describes one such aktion (deportation) in the ghetto, which swelled to 200,000 and eventually shrunk to 200-300 people surviving after the liquidation and eventual liberation:

“Here is what the house looked like. It was an old couple’s house and up in this section was where the daughter lived. This is where the old couple lived, and this is where their daughter lived. She moved out of this room and then we came and hid in this room. They had built a fake wall. They had cut a hole in it and to hide the wall where they had cut the hole, they put like kitchen utensils, bread pans, and stuff like that. They would put a bench up and have pails of water on either side of the bench.

People would go into the wall and then we would shut it behind us and just remain there. I remember hearing the Nazi army actually walking around looking around for us, but we just remained quiet and stayed there overnight. I remember my mom. She was wondering what was going on so she looked out of the wood slats, but she was told not to do that. Of course, I mean that would put us under risk. I remember the babies crying and just trying to keep everybody quiet. It was really difficult and it was very scary. We were there for about three days and then finally we were able to get out. I remember when we got out I looked around the neighborhood and people were gone.

When I got out, I also saw a little girl hiding behind this desk and I called my mom over to look at it. What we had to do was move the desk and we got the little girl out. She was so quiet and so scared. She had said that her parents were taken by the Nazi army. We got her grandmother to come and take her. Her grandmother held her in her arms and the girl just sobbed. She was only three-years-old. She had a little bow in her hair. She had a really nice dress on and big blue eyes. She was only three.”

Another clip describes a different hiding place they used while in the ghetto to try to avoid selection.

“Well there was a stove and we had to remove the stove. Then there was a like kitchen counter that we had to remove and we had to build an area underneath the floor, some stairs there. Once those were finished, we covered that over. First and foremost before we covered it though we put a big door on the ground and then we put a cloth and then we added sand to make it really hard. We added carpet over the top of that to make sure that when the army came through the house, they would not notice any difference. We made it soundproof. We did not want it to sound hollow.

Next to it, we cut out a hole in the wall and then put the kitchen counters back and then the stove back and made everything look as though everything was being used. We would use tape to adhere the pots and pans to the stove and things to the kitchen counter. There were table and some chairs and we used the chairs to climb into the hiding space.”

On another occasion the group was betrayed by a fellow Jew and deported to the Janowska labor camp only to find that later, the same person would be deported and incarcerated with them also. The money he had gained by turning them in would be of no help to him and his family once

behind the camp’s fences and guards. Within the camp, Doris’s father was separated from her and her mother and they endured very hard work detail and several illnesses. Once when a selection was about to begin and Doris was worried about being sent on to the nearby death camp at Belzec, she made a suggestion that could have been deadly:

“We saw a lot of people going in this place. There were about 500 people I think we saw over there, and I told my mom that I wanted to join them. My mom said, “No! No! Absolutely not!” You do not know what they do in there. There was a pipe that came out of the roof and my mom showed me the pipe and she said what they do is they seal it and then they use gas to kill all of the people in there.”

(Interviewer – This was in the camp right?) ‘Yes, it was in the camp.’ The building really was a hospital building and a lot of people would go in there. They would bribe their way into the infirmary because they thought their life would be spared, but instead they got killed — gassed!

Doris describes the liquidation of the camp and their final hiding place:

“I remember the last time we were in the camp, it was July 22nd. Something was going on, people were talking about something and I saw people standing around, very solemn. They were getting ready to do the appels. People were standing around wondering if their name was going to be on the list. Anytime they called my name, someone would touch me and I would raise my hand. Then there was a mass exodus that night, everyone was trying to escape.

There was an old house that they had liquidated and down in the basement it was flooded with water. That is where we stayed to wait out the army. You could see people going on with their daily chores. I could see people going to the bathroom. I remember we were there Thursday, Friday, and then Saturday morning there seemed to not be anything going on. The coast was clear and we were able to make our escape. Sylvia was with us and the four of us were able to leave.

My father went to scope out a hiding place. He explained to us what to do in the pastime, so we went to hide in the forest until my father came back at nightfall and got us. My father had found a chicken coop, where they had made a shallow pit that we could hide in. It was like a shallow pit and then they had sand over the top of it. They used bird feed sacks to cover that area. We were not able to go out at all. There was a woman that lived there that owned the property and she would come and give us information. She usually did that at night and then we would stay there all day. We were only able to eat once a day and we only ate potatoes.”

We also had mice up in the ceiling as well. My father put paper up there to try to prevent them from coming down, but you could hear them running around and scattering through the ceiling.

Sometimes when my parents would find out information, they would relay information to me via my palm, the palm of my hand. They would just form

the outline of letters in the palm of my hand like this, and they would use the Polish language to relay this information to me and sometimes they would use my back.”

Doris and her parents would spend over a year hiding in the chicken coop. When they learned that the Russians had liberated the area, they had to crawl about because their muscles were so weak from lack of use. As with many other survivors, the end of the war did not begin a time of tranquility as many Jews, especially those from Poland, found that they were not welcome home and faced the threat of death from their own countrymen. Doris' testimony is rich in its description of her life before, during and after the war and her immigration and settlement in the U.S.

WIENER / RATTNER STORY

The fascinating story of the Wiener / Rattners, a family of Deaf Austrians, has been documented by the Yale Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies with their visual testimonies of Hilda Rattner and her daughter Nelly. A score later, NTID documented Nelly's younger sister, Lilly, by producing a sit down full-length interview as well as a short documentary about the family called “EXODUS: A Deaf Jewish Family Escapes the Holocaust” (see figure 6). Hilda, her two Deaf children (Nelly and Lilly) and her Deaf brother, Richard, along with their hearing mother were able to get out of Nazi occupied Austria in 1940 only to be detained at Ellis Island for five months because of their being deaf with the threat of being returned to Europe. Thankfully they were able to gain entry into the U.S. with the support of several Jewish agencies and individuals but the children's father Isadore Rattner, who had separated from Hilda before the war, did not survive the Holocaust. The NTID produced visual history and documentary can be viewed at www.rit.edu/deafww2.



Figure 6: Still from the documentary *Exodus*

The Yale Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies are very valuable Deaf visual histories as they are rich with information. Since it is not permitted to stream these visual histories on the Deaf People and World War II website, NTID was grateful for being permitted to show excerpts from three of the Deaf survivors in this collection who are no longer living, one of which was Hilda Rattner, mentioned above. While this is one of the shortest visual histories amongst the Deaf survivors in the Yale Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies, it is packed with meaning and significance as Hilda says volumes with her facial expression and emphasis:

“It took us about two months to get to America. It was a long time. Luckily I had two brothers who had already moved to America. If it weren't for them, we surely would have been killed (signs – throats slit).

(Interviewer – And did your parents leave also?)

My father had already passed away before. My mother was with us. He was sick and died.

I was very happy in Austria. I cried when we had to leave. I loved Austria. This was before. Once the Nazis came I was disgusted and wanted nothing to do with Austria anymore.

You understand my point? After I arrived in America, about ten years later, someone nudged me and asked if I'd like to visit Vienna. At first I was unsure but decided to go. When I arrived and my friends saw me, they all burst out crying. They begged me to stay. “We want the Jewish people to

come back,” they said. (Interviewer – Oh, you went back to Vienna and you did too (too Nelly who is off camera). Yes, But I replied, “No way. You think after being forced to flee this country I am going to come back and live here, no, no!” I loved them all. I was happy to see them. They all said how sorry they were. But what are you going to do? Stay, no way. Oh, how they begged but I said, “No, I am going back to my new homeland.” I am so thankful to America and so I said goodbye to Austria.”

Studying survivors’ stories within the full context of their lives helps us to more fully appreciate the impact that the war and the Holocaust had on their families. As a result of the documentary and Lilly Rattner allowing the US Holocaust Memorial Museum to scan many photographs of Deaf Austrian life and social gatherings before the war, she has come to learn more about her father’s fate and to see primary documents detailing how difficult it was for her family to get out.

META’S STORY

And now we come to one of the testimonies of the very first person who introduced me to the Shoah from a Deaf Jewish person’s perspective. Meta N. is the woman who first shared a brief snapshot of her story with my class many years ago at Lexington and when I made the play in her honor, Dr. Simon Carmel informed me that Meta had been videotaped by Yale and was part of their Yale Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies along with several other Deaf survivors. When I was finally able to see the videotape, we had to send it out for captioning as Meta, as many interviewees will do adjusted to the communication / language of her interviewer. In this case it was a hearing, non-signing interviewer with a sign language interpreter present also. Meta responds largely in spoken English with some German when recalling names of places or titles and some gestures, ASL and fingerspelling. Meta had survived four concentration camps and while her testimony is somewhat difficult to follow, she provides some valuable first hand information about the Deaf experience within the Holocaust:

(Interviewer – And who was in charge of this camp?) An S.S. commander. I forget the name. No, I don’t remember the name. He never knew I was deaf. I was very careful myself. MY heart was beating. OH! (Interviewer – What did you think would happen to you if he knew that you were deaf?) Oh, yes. In the beginning of December or whatever, a few deaf people were there, and the S.S. commander said, “We want to take you to another place that’s better. If children want to go to school some with their mothers can go. Old people, deaf people, other handicapped people, yes.” And I didn’t want – I just was very quiet and stayed put and in the background. I was the only deaf person who remained, who stayed back. All the rest went. The

commandant never knew for three years about me. Only the young were left behind and the rest went. I was the only deaf one. Gosh! I told myself, “I am going to be brave.” I was going to “think strong.”

Like several other Deaf survivors, Meta also had a friend who would help her know when to step forward during roll call and warned her and/or aided her in situations where to hear was a matter of life or death.

WILLIAM’S STORY

William F.’s story is another outstanding visual history within the Yale Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies collection as it details the amazing story of a Deaf Hungarian Jewish man, his marriage to a Deaf Jewish woman in Czechoslovakia, their attempt to flee to Palestine, their shipwreck, “rescued” to be put into a concentration camp in Italy, their voyage to the U.S. and being placed in a refugee camp in Oswego, NY with the threat of being returned to Europe after the war. In the excerpt below, William explains what happened after a ship that was smuggling over 1,200 Jews to Palestine during the war hit an unknown island and sunk. He and his wife were the only Deaf passengers:

“We had — the ship...had broken. (Interviewer – Crashed?) Yes, the ship crashed and was destroyed. People were very afraid for their lives. The island was not far, so we had to get off. The water was coming into the ship and was about to sink. Some people knew how to swim; some didn’t. And so we made this rope, we rigged this rope up for people who didn’t know how to swim could grab onto the rope hand over hand until they reached the island. So we went to this island, and there was nothing there. It was barren. So, you know, how were we going to sleep at night? So I went back to the ship via this rope. And the ship was on its side by this time it had not sunk. And I took things like food and wood and the things that we needed for sleeping...”

We — I made, uh, an S.O.S. I drew this from a blanket that was taken from the ship. And I used shoe cream — shoe and made this S.O.S

After nine days the group was “rescued” by Italy, one of the Axis Powers along with Germany and Japan, and placed in a camp (Ferramonti) in Italy.

“In the morning there’d be like, black soup, like, coffee. There was cornbread. One each. Vegetables mixed in water. It was really poor-quality food. And morning and afternoon was all the food that we got. We were fed twice a day. I was very thin. You could see my ribs, and I was very bony. Almost —

You could have played it like a washboard. (Interviewer – Did they live in fear?) Yes, I was. At that time, there was a lot of bombing going on. And my pants were hanging. And an airplane went by and they had shot a hole into my pants and started a fire. There was a big hole in my pants. And we

were very afraid. We went into where the toilet was and lay down. And it was smelly and filthy, but it didn't matter. We had to be safe, and so we lay there. One woman who was pregnant was sitting, and she was struck in the stomach, and her womb just exploded, and it went all over the floor, and it was very smelly.

And there were many people who died all over the camp. Their faces were white.

(Interviewer - Who was bombing? Americans? Italy?)

I don't know. Germany. I don't know. We were very afraid. There was a wall.

And I was near the wall, and a bullet went right by me. And I was--luckily, I was saved. God helped me, but I was very afraid. I was very, very scared. My wife was crying. I wasn't with her at that time, but she told me she was very afraid also. We suffered terribly. There were people dead everywhere. But thank god. God saved me. I don't want to really talk about the situation. I don't sleep well at night when I think about the situation. So I just want to have a new life now.

William's story is one of perseverance, good fortune and marvel. We are incredibly grateful that Yale University conducted these testimonies, as many of the interviewees are no longer living. They also had Dr. Carmel conduct three of the interviews of survivors who are still living and since both the interviewer and interviewee all use ASL, communication complications do not surface in those testimonies.

LEOPOLD'S STORY

Sadly, the Shoah is not the only genocide the world has seen. In an effort to collect, preserve and share modern day genocides from a Deaf perspective, the visual history of Leopold Myasiro was conducted by Argiroula (Roula) Zangana and videotaped by Ryan Commerson (see figure 7). Leopold is Hutu and grew up in Rwanda where he was a witness to the genocide and civil war there. While he is a member of the dominant culture, while many Hutus took machete blades against Tutsis, Leopold did not participate in the atrocities and spent much of the four month in 1996 when the massacres were happening in hiding. While some testimonies of Deaf survivors in World War II report how Deaf non-Jews actively turned them in or demonstrated anti-Semitism towards their fellow Deaf Jews, Leopold reports that the Deaf of Rwanda were more committed to protecting each other regardless of which tribe they were members of:

"The Free Radio broadcast a lot of negative information about Tutsis. You understand that the deaf can not hear the radio so the deaf did not get access

to these hate messages. Maybe some would pick it up in school but most, like myself for example, were never taught to hate Tutsis. My classmate sitting next to me might be a Tutsi and I simply saw him as a fellow human being.

Whereas in the hearing schools they tended to teach everything including the teaching of history. This is where the conflict between the Tutsis and Hutus comes up – the on-going struggle between these tribes. Since the making of the war, the revolution in '59 – this information would be taught and studied in the hearing schools; whereas, those of us in the deaf schools would know nothing about it. We ate and sat together. There was no discussion amongst the deaf children about who was Hutu or Tutsi. We deaf were completely innocent to this hatred until hearing people would explain it to us and we were like, 'Oh, ok now I understand.' But we still could not easily go ahead and kill our brethren."

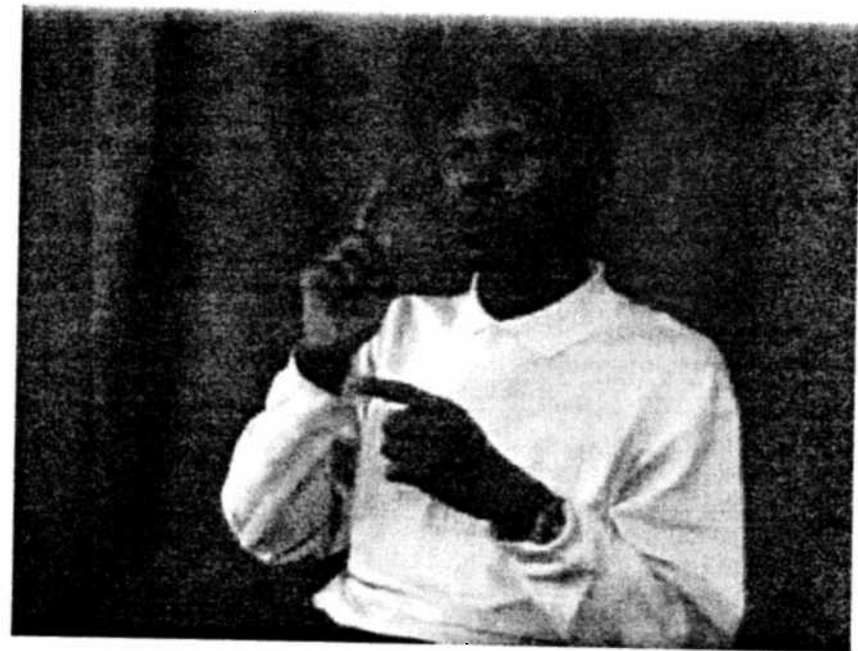


Figure 7. Leopold Myasiro

I met one of my former classmates who had stayed in his rural area, which had no deaf community there. This is perhaps why he could find no support. The hearing people did not care that he was deaf and would strike the machetes against anyone indiscriminately. This is why he still has many injuries, wounds scars from machete attacks. But within the Deaf community there is a bond and a comfort level – no one cares if someone is Tutsi or Hutu.

It is true that some deaf people died. Perhaps they lived in the rural area far from a large deaf community and only a few deaf people lived in their region. Understand that most deaf do not live close to one another.

Except for in larger cities where they look for work. This is how they often come together to share room and board. Having a job means they can afford the rent and can chip in together. This is how some deaf people were able save each other. It did not matter what tribe you were from, you shared and helped each other. When the war came, deaf hid and helped each other. They could not kill their mate. They had a connection to each other. This is how they were very lucky to survive.”

Leopold goes on to explain how Hutu Deaf people did not only refrain from participating in the genocide but some were active in protecting their Tutsi Deaf friends:

“One deaf person told me how he saved some deaf Tutsis. The army showed up at this deaf Hutu man’s home because they knew he was friendly was Tutsis and wanted to make sure he was not hiding anyone. So the man gave them some kind of cover story that there were no Tutsis there even though they were right under the bed. They could have been killed. He decided to bribe the army in order to get them to leave. This happened repeatedly until the war was over and they left. So they are still alive today. That is how they were lucky to be saved.”

While the above is second hand information, Leopold serves as a witness of the genocide while he was in hiding at his home, separated from his family and fearful that he would be seized up to join the Hutus or targeted by the Tutsi:

“My village is very close to the river Nyabarongo. This was a popular place to dump the dead bodies in and I would watch this flood of bodies flow down stream. And many birds would enjoy this feast. Like vultures, those large birds would come and eat the dead. I sat and watched and felt so badly. I wondered are some of my friends still alive or not? I had many classmates and friends who were Tutsis and I wondered if they are living or not. I wondered if they survive and we meet again, could we reconnect as friends or would they be suspicious of me. You know what I mean? One name can be used to label all, you know what I mean? I would sit, watch and wonder, what is to come later? That is a hard area to predict.”

Having testimonies of Deaf individuals who have lived through world events and can describe them in ASL and share these events from a Deaf perspective contributes a great deal to our understanding of world events, history, society, politics, language, and humanity — or inhumanity.

IMPACT OF VISUAL HISTORIES

“Ethnological phenomena are the result of the physical and psychical character of men, and of its development under the influence of the surroundings.”
Franz Boas, Anthropologist

An essential part of our work within the field of Deaf cultural studies is to bring students to the threshold of their own understanding of the human condition via the reviewing of visual histories. In 2005, I conducted a qualitative study involving twenty-two students to assess the impact of Deaf related testimonies of survivors of the Holocaust on NTID Deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing students in my World War II and Deaf People classes. Dr. Susan Foster, an ethnographic researcher at NTID/RIT, and I developed five qualitative questions for the students to respond to. Students were asked to describe their feelings in response to the visual testimonies they had viewed. At that time we did not have all the ones we presently have. Despite the low number of visual histories we had at this time, their impact was clearly measurable. Throughout our ten-week quarter, students were shown Deaf related testimonies (some were of hearing family members) but most were of Deaf survivors themselves using ASL or gestures with English captions. At the end of the quarter, students were asked to comment on the feelings they experienced while watching the visual histories, what they learned, what surprised them, if they thought deaf and hearing people experienced the Shoah differently, and whether or not they felt differently when watching deaf survivors versus hearing survivors.

Note: In order to preserve the original authenticity of the respondents and not wanting to tamper with their responses, their statements have not been edited nor their English corrected.

Question 1: Feelings and Examples

Students were asked “Take a moment to think about when you viewed the videotaped interviews. Now write down words that describe your feelings while you viewed the tapes. Can you give an example of a story that really brought out each of these feelings?”

While all of them remarked on having strong negative feelings in response to the testimonies, they were also able to report a great many positive feelings as a result of seeing the Deaf survivors share their stories with such love and strength.

	Fall '05	Winter '05
Negative Feelings	15	21
Terms Used	Nauseated, sad (3), disappointed, terrified, bad, stunned (2), shocked (2), guilty, tearful, upset, dreadful	Sad (2), heartbreaking, depressing, gross, painful, disgust, anger (2), disbelief, horrified, frustrated, bad (2), cruel, frustration, shocked, sorry (2), want to hit or beat the Nazis up (2)
Positive Feelings	11	8
Terms Used	Awed, interested, eager, proud, wow (surprised), amazing, bit of humor, heart-touching, relieved, happy, impressive	Impressed (2), hope, relief, inspired, surprised, amazement, thankful

Table 1: Reported feelings from viewing Deaf related testimonies

Question 2: Learned and Examples

The second question asked of the students was “What did you learn from these interviews that you didn’t know before? Be sure to give an example from an interview.” The students’ qualitative answers were long and well thought out. I have selected a few here so you can see examples of their own statements as to what they learned from these visual histories.

“I learned that deaf people were forced to be sterilized even though they are not Jewish – part of the eugenics movement. Even that if they had children, they would not know if their child would be deaf or hearing the Nazis were not willing to take that chance. Being deaf is almost like being Jewish, because they were disabled and not seen to be supporting the greater good of the country. Being both Jewish and deaf (also others such as black, gypsy, etc.) was an automatic death sentence during that time and were sent to the camps immediately.”

“Actually, I learned many things from the interviews that I had never known before. Take Hilda and Lilly’s story for example. I did not know that Hilda, Lilly and their family was stuck on the Ellis Island near New York City all because they were deaf and because America didn’t want them to enter their country because they were viewed as a burden to the society. I was stunned that they were stuck on that tiny island for five months straight with nothing to do except to wait and wait! Unfortunately, there were no history documented that any deaf people were stuck there on the island during the World War II, so that was why nobody really knew anything about it. I am little ashamed of America because they should have welcomed Hilda and Lilly’s family with a wide-open arms into their country. But however, they were extremely lucky that they didn’t get sent back to Europe whereas they

might be sent to the concentration camps! Not only that, I learned a lot from a fresh new perspective of the Holocaust and the World War II from the deaf person’s perspective. It all made it more realistic to me.”

Question 3: Surprising

The third open-ended question was “What was the most surprising thing you learned from the interviews?” While some students elected to restate their answer in question number two, many of them cited specific testimonies and situations that surprised them the most. In this answer we could see a pattern of common values and understandings on the part of our students.

Surprises that were most often cited have been summarized and listed.

- The fact that any Deaf Jewish people could survive
- Signing was dangerous and deadly
- Deaf people had been forcibly sterilized
- A few Deaf people were helped by SS members
- Luck played a big role in survival
- Family members either went to great efforts to help their Deaf family member or others abandoned them
- Some Jewish boys were dressed as girls to prevent them from being caught and revealed to be Jews
- The Nazis had been bad to Deaf people too (not just against Jewish people)
- People were willing to help Deaf people
- Deaf people used a variety of methods to conceal their being Deaf - truly making them silent (no voice / no signing)
- Deaf people would take great risks to leave Europe only to be rejected by the US due to their being Deaf
- Nazi passport pictures were shown in profile to emphasize the “Jewish features” (nose and ear size/shape)
- Migrating to Shanghai, China as a last resort (the only place not requiring a passport and still accepting Jewish immigrants during the war)
- Many survivors love and cherish their new homeland (U.S.) despite any difficulties entering
- Some Deaf non-Jewish people were pressured to join a Hitler youth type group
- How realistic the Deaf testimonies made the Holocaust for the students

While all of the students statements are valuable and important just a few have been selected for your review to emphasize how much is gained by sharing these visual testimonies with our students and by asking them to in turn share what they glean from them.

Student A: "In my opinion, I believe that all of the interviews of the deaf survivors' stories are all equally shocking and stunning. What surprised me in general was that those deaf survivors were so lucky to have made it out alive. They got lucky many times. They escaped the death's shadows several times. Oftentimes the deaf people had a slim chance of surviving under Hitler's regime. Hitler and his people didn't like the deaf people because they believed that they were useless to the society. Also, I wanted to note that I was surprised when I listened to Lilly telling stories how his father was sent to the gas chambers in the concentration camp because the soldiers saw her father using sign language chatting with his deaf buddies in the camp. The soldiers didn't like the deaf persons there in the camps so they decided to send them off all because their flying hands were "too noticeable, disturbing, and perhaps too annoying". It helped me picture an imagery of the deaf people just standing around and chatting in the concentration camps to help kill the time. It made it seem so realistic, and that time made me stunned the most."

Student B: "The most surprising thing from all the interviews is that the Nazis actually let the survivors that were interviewed live. The one that touched me most was the interview with William F. I myself am Hungarian and I always thought that the Hungarian were on the Germany side. His story about the escape from Europe, his ship wreck on the island and later captured by Italy where the SS soldier had a deaf sister himself and let William be with his deaf wife and let them work together. It seemed more of a romance between him and his wife and the story of a SS soldier not being like the others letting them live together. Unlike any other concentration camp I think they got lucky."

Student C: "One of the most surprising things that I learned from the videos was the extent that parents would go to in order to protect their children. The greatest example was that Stanley Teger's mother dressed him as a girl so that he would not be forced to have his genital area examined by the Nazis. If the Nazis found that a boy had been circumcised, it was an indication that the boy was Jewish. I'm sure that Stanley's mother's decision to hide him under the guise of a girl saved his life."

Student D: "I was surprise that NN was forced to join with Hitler Youth group, I think they threaten her to join in. That is really scaring for someone to threaten a German to join in Hitler Youth Group. I was surprise when Stanley got hit on his head by a soldier guns, and his mother try her very best to protect her own sons (communicating) like told him to be quiet she would squeeze his hand that is the signal of be quiet. I was surprised when father (Lore's father) said that to go ahead and abortion the baby because they don't want no half nazi mixed wit jews as of the baby get older, he or she would probably think what kind of father I had and hurted my mother. Therefore I was surprise because I'm against abortion but in her story I understand her situations."

Question 4: Different Experiences

When asked "Do you think deaf people experienced the holocaust differ-

ently than hearing people? Why or why not?" This student wrote:

"I believe that Deaf people experienced the holocaust differently than hearing people did. I think that way because usually they probably did not know what was going on, such as when her Deaf mother (De Jong) was taken away and tossed into the truck. I would imagine how scary it would be to be tossed into a truck with no one who knew I was Deaf and being unable to communicate with anyone in the truck. It would be like sitting ducks with out knowing what I would be facing next. Maybe it was harder for them when the Germans were yelling out directions and it would have taken more time for Deaf people to figure out what the Germans wanted, thus maybe the Germans may have gotten frustrated with Deaf people who were slow so they ended up shooting them before they were taken to the gas chambers. It also may have been more difficult for Deaf people to freely learn about what was going on around there because they usually had to refrain from using sign language."

Another student commented:

"I do believe that Deaf people's experiences in the Holocaust were different from those of hearing people. Overall I think that Deaf people experienced a heightened sense of confusion. I can't imagine what it must have felt like to be crammed into a cattle car, taken on a journey hours long, and then be forced to be separated from your loved ones, let alone to be forced to do all of that without having a clue as to what was being communicated around you! All of the prisoners who were taken to the camps must have been in a mass state of panic and confusion, but I think it was far worse for the Deaf prisoners. At least the hearing prisoners would be able to understand what was being screamed at them and demanded of them. I also think that Deaf people must have felt much lonelier than their fellow hearing prisoners. Unless two Deaf people happened to be assigned to the same barrack, than a Deaf person would most likely not have anyone with whom to communicate, or to share their emotions and misery."

The other qualitative responses for this question were similar to the above, demonstrating how students personalized the Holocaust experience and developed empathy and sympathy for the plight of their deaf ancestors.

Question 5: Feel Differently

For the final question, "did you feel differently when you watched the interviews with deaf survivors than when you watched the interviews with hearing survivors? If so, what do you think made you feel differently?" Several students had difficulties assessing this question. Two students reported not feeling differently with these explanations:

"No - re: deaf culture. No I don't really feel differently, because I'm not so serious about the deaf culture because I have just trying my best to learn deaf culture so however, they seems to be the same thing, because they said

things almost the same thing when they saw things happened with their own eye and actions.

Another respondent who said 'no' stated,

"I did not feel any difference after watching both hearing and deaf survivors. They all have a sad and somewhat similar story. They all share a part of history in their own eyes. They all are equals. So no I did not feel any difference and I have experience in both deaf and hearing culture being that I was raised mainstream and only knew maybe 4 hard of hearing students until I arrived at NTID. At NTID I learned there is no difference between us just the language and a little culture but we are all still equal and similar."

However, all the other Deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing students indicated that they did feel differently when watching the Deaf survivors versus the hearing ones and attributed this largely to language delivery, facial expression personal relevancy and the ability to put one's self in the interviewee's shoes:

Student A: "Yes, I felt a big difference when watching the interviews by deaf survivors than I did with hearing survivors. With hearing survivors, I felt some kind of distance from them because we have different kinds of lives and a different kind of communication methods. Thus, I was able to relate to them lesser. As for the deaf survivors, I instantly felt closer to them and understood how they felt about their experiences by looking at their face expressions and emotions on their faces. I was able to relate with them more because they are deaf like me and understood them better. Also, watching the deaf survivors discuss about their experiences made it all seem so realistic with me. But both of the deaf and hearing survivors' tales touched me equally."

Student B: "Yes, I felt differently when I watched the interviews with deaf survivors than when I watched the interviews with hearing survivors because I'm deaf myself, and I felt more connected with these deaf survivors. Especially see them signing and I could understand them well from visualizing things better. Watching deaf survivors interviews impacted me harder because it's all about the miracles. For hearing survivors, it's more common, but deaf survivors are more like WOW because they have a disability and they could be killed immediately."

Student C: "I felt differently when I watched the interviews with deaf survivors, because I can relate to them being deaf, and we still suffer persecution sometimes of being deaf. Some people can't accept that we're deaf."

Student D: "Yes. I think deaf people would tell more than hearing people. Deaf people can tell about the life and I would interested in that story about how to survive through the war. I feel differently that deaf people can tell elaborately, exactly pattern. Hearing people do different way that they talk and I am lost what hearing people lecturing."

Clearly, visual testimonies can be and should be a very significant part of Deaf Cultural Studies programs. While the classes used textbooks, web sites, discussions, and general World War II videotapes to learn about the subject matter, it is most likely that these visual histories and the visits from living survivors will stand out the most in their minds for years to come.

CONDUCTING VISUAL HISTORIES

Typical videos of Deaf people telling their personal histories have been examined more for sign production and grammar (linguistics) than for content and meaning. We wish to maintain and advance linguistic and socio-linguistic analysis of Deaf visual histories, while simultaneously urging researchers to examine how we make sense of the Deaf experience via identify values, norms of behavior, traditions, and material cultures that are revealed within these testimonies. It is vital that we record, preserve analyze and disseminate our Deaf experiences / perspectives and in doing so may we do our ancestors, elders, peers and future members honor and justice.

Key things to keep in mind when undertaking visual histories:

- Develop a rapport with the interviewee/narrator
- Videophone / preliminary interview
- Write up notes while fresh in your mind
- Research historical background
- Have maps and images ready in advance
- Ask for their materials to be filmed/scanned
- Question vs. interrogate (make interviewee comfortable and don't contradict or argue; asking gentle, guiding, and clarification questions)
- Be aware of how your gender, age, language, background etc may affect interviewee/narrator
- When possible do voice-over after the interview; don't record live voice interpretation. This allows interpreter to study the interview and meet with interviewer for clarification and preparation before recording voice interpretation
- Identify a repository / archives to donate the visual history to for others to be able to access the materials
- Get signed release from the interviewee and the interviewer (also for the voice interpreter if needed)

There are many useful sources of materials on conducting visual histories:

- The Smithsonian Folklife and Oral History Interviewing Guide by Marjorie Hunt (2003)
- http://www.folklife.si.edu/explore/Resources/InterviewGuide/InterviewGuide_home.html

- Step by Step Guide to Oral History by Judith Moyer (revised 1999): http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html
- "Oral History Manual" by Sommer and Quinlan (2002)

Articles regarding Deaf survivors and visual testimonies:

- "Oral History and Deaf Heritage: Theory and Case Studies" by Dr. Schuchman in *Looking Back* (1993)
- "Deaf People in Hitler's Europe: Conducting Oral History Interviews with Deaf Holocaust Survivors," by Dr. Ryan in *The Public Historian* (2005)
- "Creating a Video Library: An Oral History Project" by Amy Cohen and Yona Diamond Dansky in *Perspectives* (1992)

Graeme Turner in *Film as Social Practice* stated "Film is a social practice for its makers and its audience; in its narratives and meanings we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself." While speaking more of narrative films than visual history, what he speaks of is especially true for Deaf visual histories. Typical videos of Deaf people telling their personal histories have been examined more for sign production and grammar (linguistics) than for content and meaning. We wish to maintain and advance linguistic and socio-linguistic analysis of Deaf visual histories, while simultaneously urging researchers to examine how we make sense of the Deaf experience via identifying values, norms of behavior, traditions, and material cultures that are revealed within these testimonies. It is vital that we record, preserve analyze and disseminate our Deaf experiences / perspectives and in doing so may we do our ancestors, elders, peers and future members honor and justice.

"The purpose of anthropology is to make the world safe for human differences." Ruth Benedict, deaf anthropologist

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