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Visual History Archive

Introduction

USC Shoah Foundation – The Institute for Visual History and Education is dedicated to making audio-visual interviews with survivors and other witnesses of the Holocaust and other crimes against humanity a compelling voice for education and action. With a current collection of nearly 52,000 eyewitness testimonies, the Institute’s Visual History Archive preserves history as told by the people who lived it. Each testimony is a unique source of insight and knowledge offering powerful stories from history that demand to be explored and shared. In this way we will be able to see their faces and hear their voices, allowing them to teach, and inspire action against intolerance.

Initially a repository of Holocaust testimony, the Visual History Archive has expanded to include testimonies from the 1937 Nanjing Massacre in China¹ and the 1994 Rwandan Tutsi Genocide². In addition, an initial 60 of 377 testimonies from survivors and witnesses of the Armenian Film Foundation’s Armenian Genocide collection were integrated into the Visual History Archive in April 2015. Each collection adds context for the others, providing multiple pathways to learn from the eyewitnesses of history across time, locations, cultures and sociopolitical circumstances.

The archive is digitized, fully searchable, and hyperlinked to the minute, allowing students, professors, researchers, and others to retrieve whole testimonies and segments within testimonies that relate to their area of interest through a set of 62,882 indexing terms, 1.79 million names, and 682,923 images. Currently, the archive is available to the public in its entirety at 51 institutions in 13 countries.

¹Conducted through a partnership with the Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall.
²Accomplished in collaboration with Aegis Trust and the Kigali Genocide Memorial, with additional support provided by IBUKA.

“From the viewpoint of historians, the most important benefit of using testimonies is that they bring into history events that would otherwise remain completely unknown, since they are missing from conventional documentation found in archives—most of which was written by perpetrators and organizers of genocide. Testimonies can save events from oblivion, but they can also provide very different perspectives of events known through conventional documentation.”

—Omer Bartov,
John P. Birkelund Distinguished Professor of European History and Professor of History and Professor of German Studies,
Brown University