A New Haven Community Project: From Local to Global

By Joanne Weiner Rudof

Yale’s Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies is internationally recognized as an innovator of videotaping eyewitness accounts of a major historical event, making these accounts intellectually accessible, and creating educational materials from them. The archive has grown from a collection of 183 testimonies deposited at Yale by the Holocaust Survivors Film Project (HSFP) in 1981, to over 4,300 testimonies recorded at Yale and by affiliated projects in Europe, North and South America, and Israel, in twenty-two languages. The results have been numerous documentaries, books, journal articles, music compositions, teaching units, research projects at levels from upper elementary school to PhD dissertations, and videotaping projects documenting the Cambodian genocide, the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II, ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, and others. Prizes have been awarded to works about or benefiting from viewing the testimonies, among them a Grammy, an Emmy, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and recognition at major film festivals. Although given to individuals or groups for their creative and intellectual efforts, without the witness and survivor accounts, this would not have happened.

Twenty-five years ago, a brainstorm and the collaborative work of a few dedicated people with limited resources but limitless imaginations marked the humble beginnings of the Holocaust Survivors Film Project, the predecessor organization of the Fortunoff Video Archive. I can remember attending meetings in the mid 1970s of a committee that initiated, planned, and completed the construction of a monument in New Haven to those who perished in the Holocaust – more as an interested observer with energy to give than an active participant – and admiring the resolve of New Haven area survivors to publicly remember and recognize what had happened to them, their families, their communities, and the masses of others with no one left to remember them. It was from the formal dedication of that monument that the concept of videotaping the experiences of Holocaust survivors and witnesses was born.
In February 1979, representatives of the New Haven Jewish Federation and WTNH-TV-Channel 8, came together to discuss a documentary focusing on the monument’s dedication, to be produced and moderated by Laurel Vlock. Malcolm Webber and Arthur Spiegel were among the attendees. At that meeting, someone suggested that Mrs. Vlock contact Dori Laub, a child survivor and New Haven psychiatrist. The synergy between Vlock and Laub led to a videotaping session in Laub’s office on the evening of May 2nd. Laub contacted two survivors whom he knew, and Spiegel suggested others. Vlock arranged for a professional video crew and four survivors agreed to participate. They began at 6:30pm and did not finish until well after midnight. Vlock and Laub both realized that what they had recorded was extraordinary and that the impact of these stories should be shared.

It was suggested that they contact William Rosenberg, president of the local chapter of the Farband, a labor Zionist organization, with many survivors as members. Willie Rosenberg invited Vlock and Laub to attend the June meeting of the Farband at which Rosenberg expressed his passionate belief in the importance of survivors documenting their experiences in their own words and voices. The Farband pledged $1,300 to support the effort and individuals also made contributions totaling some $2,500.

It was quickly realized that more than an ad hoc effort would be needed to undertake a significant project. The Holocaust Survivors Film Project (HSFP) was formally launched on June 28 with a press conference at Rosenberg’s home attended by Mayor Frank Logue, a representative of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, local Jewish and Christian clergy, leaders of the Federation, and many survivors. A second taping session was held at Rosenberg’s home in July. By August the HSFP was formally incorporated with assistance from Melvin Ditman, (himself a child of survivors) who donated his legal services and became one of the directors of the fledgling organization. Rosenberg became the president and Ludwig Friedenberg the treasurer. Several community members provided financial support for additional taping sessions. Soon testimonies were also recorded in Hartford, Bridgeport, Kansas City and Israel. Laub remembers many meetings with HSFP board members and volunteers held in Vlock’s kitchen in order to plan taping sessions and chart the course of the future.

Through his wife, Renee, one of the first four survivors taped, Geoffrey Hartman, a professor of English and comparative literature at Yale University, was asked to assist with the fundraising because he was experienced in writing grants. Hartman, born in Frankfurt and brought by a Kindertransport
to England, quickly realized the educational and research potential of these video documents. In 1980, grant funding was received from the New Haven Foundation that provided the resources to continue taping and also to produce an educational program for the New Haven school system. Joseph Ciaburri of the New Haven Savings Bank provided office space for videotaping in New Haven. At roughly the same time, Vlock received a commitment from New York’s WNEW-TV, Channel 5, to air a documentary based on the testimonies. Vlock would be the producer, and the resulting documentary, Forever Yesterday, won an Emmy award. The school program, About the Holocaust, continues to be listed in the B’nai Brith catalog of educational materials. Hartman, appointed at that time to head Yale’s development campaign for Judaic Studies, was also exploring having the testimonies deposited at Yale.

The HSFP published several newsletters during this period and expanded taping to Boston, Palm Beach, and Norfolk. Many volunteers, including Dana Kline and Paula Their, became part of the teams that taped marathon sessions, often on weekends, with at least six sessions in one day. Laub and Vlock were indefatigable and 183 testimonies were recorded under the auspices of the HSFP.

In 1981, all the original tapes were formally deposited at Yale University with the encouragement of Yale President A. Bartlett Giamatti. The following year, helped by a start-up grant from the Charles H. Revson Foundation, the Video Archive was established as part of the Manuscripts and Archives division of the University’s Sterling Memorial Library, an internationally recognized research center. The formal inauguration was attended by Giamatti, New Haven Mayor Biagio Dilieto, Revson Foundation President Eli N. Evans, and Elie Wiesel. Staff was hired and the Revson Foundation funded a major conference entitled “Knowing and Not Knowing.” The concept of affiliated projects, to expand the videotaping of survivors throughout the United States, was initiated and a formal agreement was signed with U.C.L.A. and the 1939 Club of Los Angeles. This consortium recorded fifty-three testimonies between 1983 and 1984, copies of which were sent to Yale’s Video Archive.

An eighteen-minute program was produced for the 1983 American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Washington D.C. to encourage witnesses to come forward and give their testimony. The program introduced and promoted the goals of the Video Archive project. Geoffrey Hartman, Laurel Vlock, Dori Laub, and Malcolm Webber presented a seminar at the Gathering. Hartman contacted Jeshayahu Weinberg, who was the director of Beth Hatefusoth, Israel’s Museum of the Diaspora and who later became
the first director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and Weinberg signed an affiliation agreement that same year. Testimonies began to be videotaped in Israel in 1984 with eighty-three being recorded by Beth Hatefusoth between 1984 and 1989. It was the first international taping project of this kind.

"The Educational and Research Use of the Yale Video Archive" was the title of a conference in 1983 at which Raul Hilberg gave the keynote address. An additional grant from the Revson Foundation began a new cooperative undertaking with Facing History and Ourselves, a teacher-training institute in the Boston area. Its aim was to produce educational materials for classroom use. Professor Lawrence L. Langer, a well-known scholar of Holocaust literature, began to watch survivor testimonies as part of this joint project. The grant also funded a conference entitled “Education and the Holocaust: New Responsibilities and Cooperative Ventures,” with the goal of promoting other such cooperative efforts. Yehuda Bauer of Hebrew University was the keynote speaker. Representatives of many institutions, both established and in the planning stage, such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the New York Holocaust Museum, the Jewish Museum in New York, as well as several from Europe, attended.

At the same time as these high profile activities were occurring, Sandra Rosenstock, the archivist at the Video Archive, was facing the formidable and less glamorous task of providing intellectual access to the testimonies. It was the right time and place for this challenge since Manuscripts and Archives had become one of the founders of a consortium to develop a database for manuscript and archival materials with the Research Libraries Group. While working on developing the functional requirements for the system, Rosenstock, Katharine Morton (Yale’s Director of Manuscripts and Archives) and other staff members, realized that creating Machine Readable Catalog (MARC) records for the testimonies for inclusion in the database would maximize intellectual access to the them. Rosenstock, Morton, and Nancy F. Lyon (database manager), developed the basis for all future Video Archive bibliographic records and, in doing so, set the standard for intellectual access to all such materials. In 1984, the first bibliographic records of the Holocaust testimonies were entered into the newly launched Research Libraries Group Information Network Archives and Manuscripts Control file (RLIN-AMC).

With Revson Foundation support for expanded videotaping, it was recognized that additional interviewers would be needed. With assistance from
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Hartman, Laub, Rosenstock, and Vlock, Dana Kline organized a six-week series of classes to meet this need with volunteers from the community. The original class of twenty-two students read a required list of books and met weekly under Kline’s direction. Vlock and Laub both led sessions. It was also at this time, in September 1984, that I joined the staff of the Video Archive as manager. Over the course of the next several years, many affiliate projects were added and Geoffrey Hartman began promoting the concept internationally beyond Israel. The Revson Foundation funded much of the international taping, and Kline and Laub traveled nationally and internationally to train volunteer interviewers.

With support from the New Haven community, which realized the importance of the archive, a fundraising event was organized in 1986. Barbara Wareck, with assistance from Willie Rosenberg and Arthur Spiegel, chaired a local committee that invited the filmmaker who had just released the nine-hour plus Shoah for “An Evening with Claude Lanzmann.” It should also be noted that prior to his resignation, President Giammati designated $100,000 from discretionary funds for the Video Archive endowment.

In 1987, William Rosenberg signed a “Deed of Gift,” formally changing the status of the original 183 HSFP testimonies from a deposit to a permanent donation. When the Holocaust Survivors Film Project dissolved itself, its remaining funds were donated to the Video Archive. In April of that year, the Greater New Haven Jewish Federation sponsored “A Concert for Life” by the New Haven Symphony Orchestra. It benefited the Video Archive and music programs for children in New Haven. The fifth anniversary of the Video Archive was marked by a conference in October, sponsored by the Revson Foundation, entitled “In an Era of Testimony.” There the Israeli poet, journalist, and filmmaker Haim Gouri presented his film Flames in the Ashes. At the keynote address by Eli Wiesel in Woolsey Hall, which was filled to over capacity, Yale President Benno Schmidt announced a major gift to endowment by Alan A. Fortunoff in memory of his parents Clara and Max Fortunoff. This gift to endowment permanently established the Video Archive and added the Fortunoff name to its title.

In 1988, Marvin and Murray Lender approached Geoffrey Hartman to join them in an effort to provide teacher training to greater New Haven schools for Holocaust education programs. The Lenders, through their Federation endowment fund, have supported the Holocaust Education/Prejudice Reduction Program (HEPRP) ever since. As part of this new program, in addition to local teacher training sessions and curricular enrichment programs for
students, teachers have been given support to attend five-day summer institutes at Facing History and Ourselves in Massachusetts and a three week educational trip to Poland and Israel sponsored by the American Gathering of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and the Jewish Labor Committee. In 1992 the program sponsored a trip to Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Israel for students of greater New Haven schools. Thirty young people from fourteen school systems, four local teachers, the program director, and I participated in “Eyewitness to History.” After the trip, these students became speakers and educators throughout the area. In 1999, a board was organized for HEPRP, chaired by Gordon Gaballe and Barbara Segaloff. Funding from individual donors and family foundations have supported a local Facing History and Ourselves summer institute for the last several years in which almost 80 public and private school teachers have participated. Although external grant funding provides some support, the Lenders continue to be the backbone of the program, financially and through their active leadership.

Facing History and Ourselves published Elements of Time in 1989, a teachers’ manual for using edited programs of Holocaust testimonies in the classroom. It included many of the programs previously produced by the Video Archive staff.

Lawrence L. Langer’s book, Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory, was published by Yale University Press in 1991. Based on Langer’s eight years of viewing and studying the Video Archive testimonies, it was named one of the ten best books of the year by the New York Times Book Review. In 1991 it received the national Book Critics Circle Award and the Eugene K. Kayden Press Prize for the most distinguished book in the humanities published by an American university press. In the 1995 centennial issue of the New York Times Book Review, it was listed as one of the one hundred most important books of the century. “Different Trains” by Steve Reich, which includes sound bites from Video Archive testimonies, won a Grammy award in the classical music category in 1990.

The more prosaic work of accessioning new testimonies from across the country and around the world, copying them for preservation purposes, providing training for newly affiliated projects, cataloging the testimonies, assisting students and researchers, and producing educational programs continued. Sandra Rosenstock, the archivist who began much of this important work, left for Princeton, and I was appointed to her position. Although there was some attrition due to illness and relocations in the original group of interviewers trained by Dana Kline in 1984, these volunteers continued their
dedicated work and, thanks to them, over sixty testimonies were recorded in the Yale studio on an annual basis for many years. Geoffrey Hartman, while lecturing extensively abroad, used the opportunity to develop contacts that led to the founding of affiliate projects in London, Paris, the former Yugoslavia, Berlin, Bratislava, Prague, Buenos Aires, and Brussels. At the same time, affiliated projects were initiated in many cities in North America. Laub and Kline continued to train volunteers at many of these new projects.

1992 marked the tenth anniversary of the Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale. A fund raising reception and dinner was chaired by Barbara Wareck and Leon Weinberg with assistance from William Rosenberg. Eli Wiesel was the keynote speaker. Yale’s interim president, Howard Lamar, welcomed Eli Evans, President of the Charles H. Revson Foundation, as well as Alan and Helene Fortunoff and several of their children. A conference “The Future of Memory” was also convened.

The inception of projects in partnership with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum began with a continuation of taping in Israel, first with Masua, a kibbutz with the mission of Holocaust education, and then independently. The former coordinator of the Beth Hatefusoth project, Nathan Beyrak, continued to work with us. We also instituted taping in Eastern Europe. Supported by Revson and in partnership with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Ghetto Fighters Kibbutz, Beyrak brought teams to Poland, Ukraine and Belarus. Starting in 1994, Steven Spielberg’s Visual History of the Shoah Foundation called upon Geoffrey Hartman, Dana Kline, and me for advice in launching their own survivor videotaping project. In 1995 Spielberg’s Righteous Persons Foundation provided a cataloging grant to the Fortunoff Video Archive that enabled an expansion of its staff and increased its ability to catalog many more testimonies. Richard Szary, as Director of Manuscripts and Archives, provided additional space for staff expansion and initiated the use of the Manuscripts and Archives Reading Room for Video Archive viewers. With a small grant from the Yale library’s professional organization, a website was launched in 1996 (www.library.yale.edu/testimonies). Designed by our manager, L. Christopher Burns, it was the first Yale website to use moving images and won national and international awards. I recently learned the Fortunoff Video Archive website is among the top twenty within the Yale Library system and in the month of June 2004 alone had 3,968 hits.

In 1996, contacted by Alan Fortunoff, the independent filmmakers Joshua Greene and Shiva Kumar began working on a documentary in collaboration
with the Fortunoff staff. At the same time, Fortunoff and Greene spearheaded a major fundraising initiative which ultimately raised almost a half million dollars for preservation purposes. Using these funds over the course of the next several years, thousands of our oldest videocassettes were restored and reformatted. New York’s Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, an affiliated project, shared equally in the cost of this preservation work on those tapes we had previously recorded in partnership with them—again through the good graces of the Revson Foundation. Brandon Pustejovsky, our manager at that time, coordinated most of these activities.

Professors Robert Burt and Harold Koh, of the Yale Law School were instrumental in organizing our 1998 conference “Searching for Memory and Justice: The Holocaust and Apartheid,” co-sponsored by the Yale Law School’s Orvill H. Schell Jr. Center for International Human Rights. Speakers included the Minister of Justice of South Africa, Saul Friedlander (U.C.L.A. and Tel Aviv Universities), members of the constitutional Court of South Africa, Michael Marrus (University of Toronto), directors and staff of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Yaron Ezrahi (Hebrew University), journalist Philip Gourevitch, scholars from France, Germany, and the United States, and South African activists. It was a unique opportunity for scholars of two different persecuted peoples to learn from each other. An exhibit at Yale’s Sterling Memorial Library showcased the conference.

1998 marked another important event, not visible to the public, but vital for the preservation of the testimonies. The Library Shelving Facility opened. It is a state of the art storage facility with rigid temperature and humidity controls and particulate air filtration. The storage modules are entered at most twice a day in order to maintain the ideal climate. Between 1996 and 1998 Video Archive staff, led by Debra Bush, barcoded over 13,000 cassettes to prepare them for the move to the LSF. Storing the cassettes at the LSF has insured years more life for these unique materials.

The Charles H. Revson Foundation provided major funding for Witness: Voices from the Holocaust, a documentary for which I was Associate Producer, and which resulted from Green’s and Kumar’s efforts. Alan Fortunoff and the Dorot Foundation were among other donors who made this possible. Witness was critically acclaimed when it was nationally broadcast by PBS on Yom Hashoah of 2000. It won awards in several film festivals and was broadcast in Canada and Israel. The Free Press published a book of the same title, which is an expanded version of the documentary and includes an introduction by Lawrence L. Langer and an afterword by Geoffrey Hartman.
Major gifts to endowment by the Hilda and Jacob Blaustein Foundation, Darrell Ross, and Alan M. Fortunoff reinforced the permanent status of the Fortunoff Video Archive.

In 2002 we received a multi-year preservation grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. We also became a Beta test site for a new preservation system that utilizes robotics. The new technology will enable us to preserve and reformat a much larger number of cassettes for the same amount of money. At the same time, these testimonies will be digitized, all of them to an access format, and a smaller number to a newly developed preservation format.

A grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation administered by the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation and shared with the University of Southern California and Rice University presently assists our joint exploration of how to best disseminate for teaching and research on these three campuses the testimonies recorded by the Shoah Foundation. Yale’s unique role will be to provide a single search mechanism for testimonies, whether they are part of the Fortunoff Video Archive holdings, or of the Shoah Foundation collection. The grant will also provide support for the digitization of the testimonies mentioned above.

The twentieth anniversary of the Fortunoff Video Archive was marked in October 2002 by an international conference entitled “The Contribution of Oral Testimony to Holocaust and Genocide Studies.” The conference was generously supported by Darrell Ross (Yale, 1969), as well as by the Revson Foundation, Patricia and Robert Weis (Yale, 1941) and James and Jacqueline Gordon (Yale, 1998). We dedicated the conference to the memory of four people without whose help the Fortunoff Archive could not have succeeded. Alan M. Fortunoff had continued to take an active interest in the Archive and supported it year by year until his death in July 2000. Laurel Vlock’s initial vision sparked the entire enterprise. Without her, the HSFP would not have come into being, and she continued to support the Fortunoff Video Archive. William Rosenberg, head of the Farband, seconded Laurel Vlock’s initiative enthusiastically. He was a true guardian: he came to the Archive regularly and always “rallied the troops” when there was a financial need. Dr. Sigi Ziering, a survivor from Los Angeles whose testimony was recorded at Yale, and who became a member of our Honorary Board of Advisors, personally funded our videotaping in Israel for many years, and also raised significant funds from others. Geoffrey Hartman recognized their enormous contributions at the public events as well as a dinner that was attended by the families of
Alan Fortunoff, William Rosenberg, and Laurel Vlock. Martin Bútora, the United States Ambassador from Slovakia to the United States and former director of our affiliate project in Bratislava, and Eli N. Evans, President of the Charles H. Revson Foundation, also spoke at the dinner.

Alice Prochaska, University Librarian, hosted a pre-conference dinner for the conference speakers as well as a reception in the library for speakers and honored guests. Elie Wiesel presented the keynote address. The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscripts Library co-sponsored a literary symposium, “Holocaust Literature: Freedoms and Responsibilities.” The panelists were Aharon Appelfeld, author and professor of Hebrew literature at Ben-Gurion University; E.L. Doctorow, author and professor of English at New York University; Irving Feldman, poet and professor of English at SUNY Buffalo; and Thane Rosenbaum, author and professor of law and literature at Fordham University. I organized an exhibit in the Sterling Memorial Library Memorabilia Room that displayed a history of the Fortunoff Video Archive and materials from many collections in the Yale University Library, including yizkor books, photographs, music scores, rare books, maps, and posters. Each item was paired with relevant excerpts from Fortunoff Video Archive testimonies. A virtual version of the exhibit can be viewed online at the Yale University Library website (www.library.yale.edu) under “exhibits” or at the Fortunoff Video Archive website (www.library.yale.edu/testimonies) under “conference exhibit.” Many of the papers read at the conference will be published in a 2005 issue of the scholarly journal Poetics Today.

Presently we are working on a joint videotaping project with the Bergen-Belsen Memorial and Museum. Although we have many testimonies of survivors of the Belsen camp, we are asking those whose testimonies we will now record to also recall in detail their time in the Belsen displaced persons camp. We have already interviewed several people who staffed the rescue effort after liberation both in the concentration and the displaced persons camp. This year I produced Remembering Częstochowa, Poland, an edited program for a museum exhibit in Częstochowa, Poland. The exhibit will move to Warsaw and Krakow as well.

I don’t believe anyone in 1979 could have visualized that a late night videotaping session could have grown into what the Fortunoff Video Archive is today. Hundreds of people view the testimonies every year. Among them have been students of many levels from all over the world; musicians, playwrights, dramaturges, artists, novelists, historians, theologians, psychologists, physicians, filmmakers, journalists, and museum exhibit designers.
This year, like every other, we have processed numerous authorizations to publish from those wishing to include testimony excerpts in their conference papers, journal articles, documentaries, and books. A Yale college senior paper based on the writer's research won a prize at graduation. What is striking in looking back at these last twenty-five years is the many, many people who contributed so much time, energy, inspiration, money, and hard work. I wish I could name them all, but it would extend beyond a reader’s tolerance this already lengthy article. I am personally grateful for having had the opportunity to help build this collection, but even more important, for the privilege of meeting and working with so many wonderful people and forming lifelong ties of friendship.

Each and every survivor who has offered to share his or her story with us, often at great psychic cost, has left a precious legacy for us and for generations to come. The interviewers who have listened, and continue to listen to these accounts, have also made a contribution whose value is incalculable. We have employed many students, and some tell me working with these materials changed their lives. The Yale University Library considers the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies one of its premier collections, and it does this based not on any emotional factors but on the archive's obvious value as demonstrated by its many visitors and the papers, books, journal articles, music compositions, and other works resulting from viewing the testimonies. As the generation of survivors passes, I hope that it is with some sense that their memories will be safeguarded and live after them.

Note: For additional material, access the website at <www.library.yale.edu/testimonies>