

# Curating and Analyzing Oral History Collections

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## Abstract

This paper presents the digital interview collections available at Freie Universität Berlin, focusing on the online archive *Forced Labor 1939-1945*, and discusses the digital perspectives of curating and analyzing oral history collections. The digital curation of interview collections faces a number of problems like standards interoperability or privacy protection, but also chances built on progress in automatic speech recognition. Digital archives enhance the possibility of comparative studies. A pilot study based on two interviews from the Berlin collections, highlights differences in narrative performativity, in dialogical interaction, and in multilingualism. Finally, the paper looks at perspectives of interdisciplinary cooperation with CLARIN projects and at the challenges of cross-collection search and de-contextualization.

## 1 Interview collections at Freie Universität Berlin

Since 2006, the Center for Digital Systems (CeDiS) of Freie Universität Berlin has been creating or giving access to several major collections with testimonies focusing on the Second World War and Nazi atrocities. The *Visual History Archive* of the USC Shoah Foundation ([www.vha.fu-berlin.de](http://www.vha.fu-berlin.de)), the *Fortunoff Video Archive* of Yale University, the online interview archive *Forced Labor 1939-1945* ([www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de/en](http://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de/en)), the British-Jewish collection *Refugee Voices* ([www.refugeevoices.fu-berlin.de](http://www.refugeevoices.fu-berlin.de)), the *Archiv Deutsches Gedächtnis* of FernUniversität Hagen ([deutsches-gedaechtnis.fernuni-hagen.de](http://deutsches-gedaechtnis.fernuni-hagen.de)) and the new interview archive *Memories of the Occupation in Greece* ([www.occupation-memories.org](http://www.occupation-memories.org)) contain thousands of audio-visual life-story interviews.

Some of these collections are only accessible in the library or the campus network of Freie Universität Berlin, others are presented online in new working environments. Contrary to other Oral History collections where much research still relies on written transcriptions, some of these platforms come with a time-coded alignment of transcriptions, media files, and metadata, and allow for thematically focused searches and annotations throughout the video-recordings. To make the recordings accessible for research, teaching, education and the general public, CeDiS has created translations, maps and learning applications giving didactical support for teachers and students. Additionally, its team is engaged in academic debates through publications and conferences on oral history and digital humanities (Apostolopoulos and Pagenstecher, 2013; Pagenstecher and Tausendfreund, 2015; Nägel, 2016; Apostolopoulos et al., 2016; Pagenstecher and Pfänder, 2017; Pagenstecher, 2018).

The oral history projects started when Freie Universität Berlin became the first full-access-site to the Shoah Foundation's *Visual History Archive* outside the United States. Numerous German research projects (Bothe and Brüning, 2015; Michaelis, 2013) and university courses are using the collection; large educational programs were developed and implemented in German schools (Pagenstecher and Wein, 2017). Whereas the Shoah Foundation initially had not transcribed its 53,000 interviews, CeDiS created 908 German-language (plus 50 foreign-language) transcriptions (<http://transcripts.vha.fu-berlin.de>). These transcripts are time-coded every minute enabling full text search over all 958 interviews (Abenhausen et al., 2012). The Shoah Foundation offers the German transcripts as a kind of subtitles within their online archive – if your university has subscribed with the *Visual History Ar-*

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hive's new commercial provider ProQuest (ProQuest, 2017). In 2017, the Shoah Foundation provided another 984 transcripts in English in their online archive (USC Shoah Foundation, 2017).

## 2 The Online Archive *Forced Labor 1939-1945*

In a second step, Freie Universität Berlin created a sophisticated online platform for a new interview collection on Nazi forced labor. The interview archive *Forced Labor 1939-1945: Memory and History* commemorates more than 20 million people who were forced to work for the Reich.

590 former forced laborers tell their life stories in detailed audio and video interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted in the Ukraine, Poland, and Russia. About a third of the interviewees were prisoners of concentration camps – many of them Jews or Roma. The biographical interviews do not only relate to Nazi forced labor; they also touch upon various other historical aspects of the Century of Camps, from Holodomor to Perestroika, from the Spanish Civil War to the Yugoslav Wars.

The collection was initiated and financed by the foundation *Remembrance, Responsibility and Future*. The testimonies were recorded in 2005 and 2006 by 32 partner institutions in 25 countries (Plato et al., 2010). Most of them were transcribed, translated into German, indexed and made available in an online archive together with accompanying photos and documents (Apostolopoulos and Pagenstecher, 2013). The user interface is available in English, German and Russian. Users are required to register before they can access the full interviews online. Since 2009, almost 10,000 archive users – students, researchers, teachers, and other interested persons – have been granted access to the collection.

Faceted search options allow the user to filter the interviews for victims' groups, areas of deployment, places, camps and companies or language of interview. The time-coded alignment of transcriptions, translations and media files supports full-text search through the audio or video recordings. Thus, the user can jump directly to interview sequences concerning a specific topic or compare national or gender-specific narrations about different topics, for example sabotage in the camps.

The screenshot displays the website interface for the 'Forced Labor 1939-1945: Memory and History' archive. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'Home', 'Deutsch', 'Русский', 'Map', 'Collections', and 'FAQ'. A user profile 'cpagenst' is visible with options for 'workbook' and 'sign out'. The main header features the title 'FORCED LABOR 1939-1945 MEMORY AND HISTORY' and a search bar with the text 'Search the archive' and 'one interview selected'. Below the header, the interview title 'Lasker-Wallfisch, Anita' is shown with the details 'female, born in 1925' and a 'mark interview' button. The main content area is divided into three sections: 'Interview' (with a 'Forced Labor Data' tab), a video player, and a search interface. The 'Interview' section lists metadata such as 'Duration of Interview: Video 3h24min', 'Date of Interview: 17.03.2006', 'Interviewer: Thonfeld, Christoph', 'Transcriber: Not Specified', 'Language: English, with German translation', 'Translator: Pfannmöller, Katrin', 'Researcher: Bauer, Christiane', 'Proofreader: Pfannmöller, Katrin', 'Segmentator: Hahn, Philipp', and 'Subset: Great Britain – FernUni Hagen'. The video player shows a video of Anita Lasker-Wallfisch speaking, with a progress bar at 19:52 and a subtitle 'So I became a member of this orchestra, which, I will say, really saved my life. I mean, we knew all the while we were sitting, our block was practically opposite the crematorium.' The search interface on the right shows a search for 'orchestr\*' and a 'Table of Contents' section with search results for 'orchestra' in English and German.

Figure 1: Interview with Holocaust survivor Anita Lasker-Wallfisch with metadata, subtitles and full-text search in the *Forced Labor* archive, www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de, 30 Jan 2019

A map visualizes the interviewees' birthplaces and deployment locations and demonstrates the European dimensions of Nazi forced labor – and of post-war migration patterns. Using satellite imagery, the user can move from the geographical macro level to the topographical micro level by zooming in onto – vanished or preserved – barracks and factories. Through this form of visualization, digital mapping contextualizes the survivors' testimonies within current local cultures or memory – or forgetting.

In 2019, the archive got a new user interface supporting mobile devices and additional research options, including a register of persons, camps and factories linked to specific interview segments. Recent CeDiS projects with other collections use the same technology as the *Forced Labor 1939–1945* project, adding project-specific functionalities. With about 2,500 audio and video interviews, the *Archiv Deutsches Gedächtnis* at FernUniversität Hagen is the largest collection of oral history interviews in Germany (Gref et al., 2018). Containing narrative language data from many different research and documentation projects over the last four decades, it is being digitized and made available step-by-step by FernUniversität Hagen in cooperation with CeDiS. In the *Memories of the Occupation in Greece* project, however, over 90 video interviews with 91 witnesses of the German occupation of Greece during World War II were recorded, transcribed, translated and annotated between 2016 and 2018. Several other collections on different historical topics will use similar platforms in the coming years.

The screenshot shows the website's search results page. At the top left is the logo and the text 'Μνήμες από την Κατοχή στην Ελλάδα'. The main heading is 'Αποτελέσματα αναζήτησης' (Search Results) with a sub-heading '25 Αποτελέσματα αναζήτησης'. Below this are two tabs: 'Συνεντεύξεις' (Interviews) and 'Τόποι γέννησης' (Places of Birth). The results are displayed in a grid of six video thumbnails. Each thumbnail includes a name, a brief description of their experience, and the duration of the video. The right sidebar contains a search bar, a language selector (DE | EL), and a filter menu with categories like 'ΦΥΛΟ' (Gender), 'ΕΤΟΣ ΓΕΝΝΗΣΗΣ' (Year of Birth), 'ΕΜΠΕΙΡΙΑ' (Experience), and 'ΙΣΤΟΡΙΚΕΣ ΠΕΡΙΟΔΟΙ' (Historical Periods).

Figure 2: Searching for female narrators in the responsive Greek-language user interface of the *Memories of the Occupation in Greece* archive, www.occupation-memories.org, 30 Jan 2019

### 3 Digital Perspectives

The digital curation of interview collections faces a number of problems. Digital preservation strategies must deal with constantly changing technologies, standards and file formats in order to pursue an affordable sustainability. Online archives enhance the accessibility of testimonies but have to respect the narrators' privacy rights when dealing with sensitive biographical narrations. Every collection has different – and often not well-defined – ethic and legal restrictions. Increasing digital availability and growing data protection standards make these varieties a difficult issue which must be tackled systematically collection by collection.

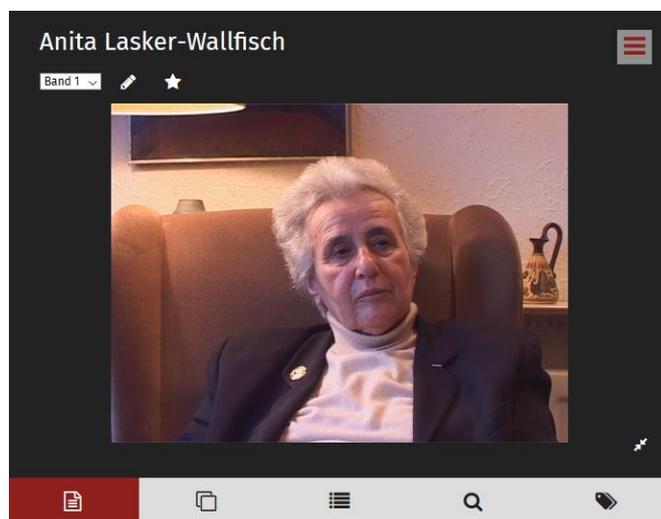
Future goals will include the discussion and dissemination of interoperable metadata standards, long-term preservation strategies, comparable transcription and indexing guidelines, together with cor-

responding software tools to support labor-intensive curation processes. If digital interview archives can gradually achieve some of these goals, well known in the wider context of Digital Humanities, they hold a rich potential for new and interdisciplinary research approaches.

Indexation and full-text search make the long recordings accessible but require the huge effort of manual transcriptions. Even though automatic speech recognition technology has made considerable progress in recent years, the poor recording quality of many oral history testimonies limits the usability of automatically generated transcriptions – given also high standard expectations of the research community. Considerable progress is expected in this field, however, through a cooperation with CLARIN partners like WebMAUS/BAS Munich, Malach/LINDAT Prague or the *oralhistory.eu* group. CLARIN workshops in Oxford 2016 (CLARIN-PLUS, 2016) and Munich 2018 (CLARIN workshop, 2018) discussed standards, explored requests and tested tools. Important steps would be the creation of dirty transcripts (for search instead of display) and the forced alignment of existing transcriptions without time codes. An implementation of phonetical search through Czech and English oral history interviews, developed by researchers from Pilsen, is accessible at the Malach Center for Visual History in Prague (Stanislav et al., 2016). The Fraunhofer IAIS and the *Archiv Deutsches Gedächtnis* at FernUniversität Hagen are working on improvements of the IAIS audio mining system for transcribing and indexing oral history interviews (Gref et al., 2018). Dutch scholars are combining a sequence different tools for various curation steps into a “transcription chain” (Hessen et al., 2018).

The digital interview archives created by CeDiS have been aimed at historians, educators, and the general public, supporting the qualitative and hermeneutic study of individual testimonies. Therefore, no tools for corpus-linguistic, data-driven or other quantitative analyses had been integrated. Given the growing importance of Digital Humanities approaches, however, such tools can provide a future perspective for oral historians and their collections. Searching for keywords in context over large interview corpora could detect patterns of experience, memory and narration, and might be used for a wide array of research questions. Gender studies could ask: Are women narrating their life-story in a different way than men? Social gerontologists could look at how elderly people speak about childhood experiences. Different comparative studies on various aspects of history and memory, but also in the fields of language acquisition, can make use of the digital search facilities in these interview archives.

## 4 Comparative Studies



And I was led to the music block which was, compared to the quarantine, like a five-star hotel, I mean it was, we had bunks, three on top, but at least we didn't have these shelves where people, you know, we had -Kojen-, and she gave me a cello and said, "Play something."

Figure 3: Interview with Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, [www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de](http://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de), 30 Jan 2019

Some preliminary studies have proved that the interview archives can be very useful for comparative approaches – even without applying quantitative methods (Michaelis, 2013; Plato et al., 2010; Thonfeld, 2014). As a very limited example, I have compared two interviews with Holocaust survivor Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, who had been cellist in the women's orchestra at Auschwitz and later became co-founder of the English Chamber Orchestra. The first interview was recorded in 1998 as part of the Shoah Foundation's *Visual History Archive*, the second in 2006 as part of the *Forced Labor* archive. The analysis highlights differences in narrative performativity, in dialogical interaction, and in multilingualism (Pagenstecher, 2018).

The comparison of the two interviews shows a greatly increased narrative experience. Lasker-Wallfisch's performative effort became more elaborate and successful in her later narration when she directly quoted other people more often. In 1998, there are about

100 instances of direct speech, in 2006 about 320 instances. The transcript of the later interview, which is just over 50% longer, contains over 300% more quotation marks. In 1998, Lasker-Wallfisch described her introduction to the orchestra at Birkenau using indirect speech: “So, she asked me to play something.” In 2006, however, she used a direct quotation: “And she gave me a cello and said: ‘Play something’.” This seems to be a general tendency in narrating: When studying re-tellings in other contexts, linguists found a move towards performativity, marked by an increase in direct speech. More experienced narrators give their testimony with more performative elements and an enhanced narrative authority.

Comparing the testimonies from an interactional point of view, the focus is on the dialogue with the interviewer. This dialogue is somewhat hidden, because the camera focuses on the narrator. Often, it is overlooked by historians who are more interested in fact-finding than in the co-construction of the testimony. Oral history beginners are even being told “An interview is not a dialogue” in an introductory text (Oral History Center). As a first step to studying the interaction, the interviewer’s interventions within in the interviewee’s main narration were counted. Both interviewers – Scottish BBC journalist Joanna Buchan in 1998, German Historian Christoph Thonfeld in 2006 – intervened roughly once per minute throughout the interview, which apparently is an average value (Michaelis, 2013, p. 288). But half of Thonfeld’s interventions were just supporting incentives to continue (“hm”, “yes”), whereas Buchan asked many where, when and how questions, sometimes interrupting Lasker-Wallfisch’s narrative flow. These results point to different professional backgrounds of the individual interviewer (oral historian vs. journalist), but also to different methodical guidelines in the interviewing projects (*Forced Labor* archive vs. *Shoah Foundation*). Digital interview collections can support such a comparative analysis of transcripts on a larger scale, helping us to better understand the working alliance between narrator and interviewer which lies at the heart of each oral history interview.

Comparative studies on historical topics like the Holocaust or Nazi Forced Labor need to deal with different languages. In the *Forced Labor* archive, “Auschwitz” is mentioned in 188 interviews in 19 different languages, while the *Visual History Archive* contains almost 14,000 interviews in around 30 languages with this index term. Due to the deportation and forced migration experiences, many testimonies contain language-mixes or are almost bilingual documents. Words or sentences from another language are not yet searchable systematically, but at least are marked in italics in the *Forced Labor* archive. Comparing Anita Lasker-Wallfisch’s testimonies in English, we can study an increased use of her German mother tongue in the later narration. In 1998, she used only a handful of German words, apparently taken over from the SS, such as “Zählappell”. In all survivors’ testimonies, the German perpetrators’ camp language has entered the victims’ memories narrated in another language. In 2006, however, her German mother-tongue keeps surfacing continuously for different topics from the pre-war and the post-war period. The main reason for this could be the German interviewer, but also her own cautious re-opening towards her country of birth and persecution over the years.

In general, a linguistic approach, supported by digital tools, can help the historian in listening more closely to the details of narrating, focusing on specific words rather than on general content. It might be interesting, for example, in which contexts Anita Lasker-Wallfisch – and other survivors – talk about themselves as individuals, using the “I”, or as members of a group, saying “we”. We might want to understand when narrators use active verbs, remembering or reclaiming their agency, or passive constructions, signaling powerlessness and victimhood.

In such future research projects, an increased cooperation between oral historians and corpus and interactional linguists can be very productive; the CLARIN network could be a helpful framework.

## 5 Cross-collection Search

Now, these comparisons between two single interviews are quite limited in their scope. For a more systematic approach, however, towards different narrator group subsets, the interview transcripts would have to be more standardized in a really machine-readable form. But the oral history community has been slow to accept transcription or annotation standards. Therefore, CeDiS is working on a TEI schema for oral history interviews, building on the TEI guidelines for transcribed speech (Text Encoding Initiative, 2018) and the ISO standard 24624:2016 prepared by CLARIN Center IdS Mannheim (Schmidt, 2017). Such a schema will include relevant metadata about the narrators’ and the interview-

ers' age, gender, mother-tongue, or social group, but also different annotation layers including speaker changes, pauses, non-verbal utterances, words in other languages etc.

Existing digital archives allow comparative studies within a single collection. A cross-collection search is difficult, however, since different collections are not linked through a meta-catalogue. Especially in Germany, the interview collections, often run by under-funded non-governmental initiatives, have very different cataloguing systems and metadata schemas; many interviews have not even been digitized. But even for the digital archives developed at CeDiS, the application of long-term open linked data strategies proved to be difficult, because of very limited time frames, different thematic contexts or restrictive access conditions in the various projects. In the future, however, CeDiS will use more interoperable platforms and standards, and also assign a Digital Object Identifier (DOI) to each interview and make some basic, anonymized metadata harvestable. It is also planned to enhance the visibility of the collections in generic archival portals like Archivportal-D, language resource registries like the Virtual Language Observatory or cultural heritage catalogues like the Europeana.

The different domains of archives, language and heritage – not to mention film history or Holocaust research – are working with diverse metadata standards. Large library-based oral history collections in the US have created MARC21 records for their interviews; some catalogues like the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI) have adapted the Encoded Archival Description (EAD) schema. Most of these standards are not very adequate for oral history interviews. The rather flexible Component Metadata Initiative (CMDI) framework with its Oral History profile might provide an interoperable solution, however (CLARIN-PLUS 2016).

In a separate project, the CeDiS team explores the chances of linking interview data by creating a cross-collection catalogue of audio- or video-recorded testimonies. This pilot is being developed within the HERA-funded project *Accessing Campscapes*, which studies the contested transformation of former Nazi and Stalinist camps into sites of remembrance with approaches from contemporary archaeology, oral history and memory research ([www.campscapes.org](http://www.campscapes.org)). Various projects have interviewed survivors of these camps at different times; some narrators have given several testimonies. Such a cross-collection database can support comparative studies, point the researcher to prominent as well as forgotten survivor narratives, and help in researching the contested pasts of these places.

Creating such a catalogue, however, faces various challenges – like different curation strategies, heterogeneous metadata and restricted access to various collections. The pilot of the *Accessing Campscapes* project will only collect metadata of some selected institutions at a certain point in time. A central directory of oral history sources, which harvests the growing number of databases at individual institutions automatically, remains a future goal.

## 6 Reflections

To summarize, digital oral history collections can be a valuable source for interdisciplinary research, specifically in a cooperation between linguists and historians. The collections created or hosted at CeDiS of Freie Universität Berlin are already digitized and accessible. Their data need to become more machine-readable, however, to allow cross-collection searching and digital analysis.

New research perspectives can open up, when “oral history meets linguistics” – the title of a 2015 workshop in Freiburg (Pagenstecher and Pfänder, 2017). Cooperative projects with corpus linguists and conversation analysts can yield interesting results, since they can combine data-driven research with qualitative-hermeneutic approaches. The narrative patterns detected with a digitally supported analysis – or distant reading – will have to be interpreted through a careful listening to individual testimonies – or close reading.

While moving forward with technology and standards, some precaution and reflection will be necessary, however, when we treat recordings of personal life-stories as a corpus of audiovisual data. For an oral historian, perhaps the de-contextualization of the individual narration is the most worrying aspect, specifically when working with testimonies from Holocaust survivors. With reference to Walter Benjamin, Andree Michaelis (2013, p. 247) has written about the “testimony in the age of mechanical reproduction”. So, what happens to the testimony and its aura – or respectful understanding – in the digital age?

In general, the digitized perception of historical sources – papers, videos or artifacts – usually implies a higher degree of abstraction on an intellectual and sensual level, because the material and embodied dimensions of the past are lost. When researchers watch survivors’ recordings on the screen, instead of listening to them in person, they obviously miss a lot of context – what was said before the recording, how the apartment looked or smelled like etc. While interview protocols and set photos are available for many interviews, every secondary analysis will have to cope with a loss of contextual knowledge. Obviously, the meaning of “context” differs between disciplines: While linguists are used to working with data recorded by others, many qualitative social researchers would reject such an approach because the study-level metadata often is not giving enough contextual information.

While this larger distance seems to be inherent to digital research, digital environments for oral history allow working much closer to the audio-visual historical source. In the age of the tape recorder, most oral historians worked with a textual representation of the recording in the form of a transcript. Nowadays, digital technology helps us to study the audio-visual sources themselves, including the multiple modalities of text, speech, silence, gestures and facial expressions captured in the video images and the audio track. Given their text-oriented research tradition, historians now have to take up new approaches in analyzing these multimodal sources of memory. Any cooperation with linguists or other disciplines will be extremely helpful in that endeavor.

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