

Technology preserves Holocaust survivors' memories

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A Dimensions in Testimony exhibit featuring Holocaust survivor William Morgan using an interactive virtual conversation is shown at the Holocaust Museum in Houston, Texas, January 11, 2019. The University of Southern California Shoah Foundation has recorded 18 interactive testimonies with Holocaust survivors over the last several years. Photo by: David J. Phillip/AP Photo

DALLAS, Texas — At age 17, Max Glauben had already lost his mother, father and brother at the hands of the Nazis. Then U.S. troops rescued him while he was on a death march from one German concentration camp to another.

Glauben is a Holocaust survivor. The Holocaust was the imprisonment and mass killing of Jews in Europe during World War II by Nazi Germany. Glauben's recollections are now being recorded so that later generations will be able to ask him questions. In fact, they will be asking questions to an image of Glauben.

Glauben is 91 years old. He is the latest Holocaust survivor to be recorded in this way by the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation. Now a Dallas resident, Glauben survived the Warsaw Ghetto and Nazi concentration camps back when he lived in Poland.

Poland's Warsaw Ghetto

The Warsaw Ghetto began after Germany invaded Poland in 1939. Having taken Warsaw, the Polish capital, the Nazis moved more than 400,000 Jews to a neighborhood of the city. In 1940, German forces built a wall around this Jewish ghetto, with barbed wire and armed guards.

The Nazis built Jewish ghettos throughout Eastern Europe during World War II. In 1941, they began taking large numbers of Jews from the ghettos to the concentration camps. The camps became mass killing centers. About 6 million European Jews were killed during the Holocaust.

"Race Against Time"

The Shoah Foundation, which is based in Los Angeles, California, has recorded 18 interactive testimonies with Holocaust survivors over the last several years. Executive director Stephen Smith says they're in a "race against time" as they work to add more. They seek both a variety of experiences and testimonies in different languages. The foundation was founded in 1994 by film director Steven Spielberg.

Glauben has worked to educate people about the Holocaust. "I thought that my knowledge could cure the hatred and the bigotry and the killings in this world if somebody can listen to my story, my testimony, and be educated even after I'm gone," he said.

Interactive Technology

Smith says that the foundation has about 55,000 video testimonies about genocides in dozens of languages, with most from the Holocaust. Genocide is the planned killing of a large group of people primarily because of their race or ethnicity. The interactive technology stands out from other speeches for allowing visitors to talk to survivors.

"It's your questions that are being answered," Smith said, adding that the replies, especially on topics like forgiveness, can be touching. He says, "You actually sometimes see them struggling to know what to answer."

So far, the foundation has Holocaust survivors speaking in English, Hebrew and Spanish. The group hopes to get people speaking in even more languages.

"It's so powerful when it's in your mother tongue and you're looking the person in the eye and you are hearing" your own language, Smith said.

For more than a year now, the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center has featured the survivors' images in a special theater. The museum's chief executive officer, Susan Abrams, says that when visitors interact with the images, the effect is often obvious. "People get teary, people laugh."

A Small Group Conversation

"Our audience comes to feel that they know these survivors somewhat intimately because they're having a small group conversation," Abrams said. She added, "And in that moment, pretty much everything else fades away."

The Illinois museum is one of four currently featuring the images. Other museums are in Houston, Texas; Indiana; and New York. The Holocaust museum in Dallas will start showing them in

September, after it opens in a new location and with a new name, the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum.

The Dallas museum brings in survivors to talk to students and has found that's often the most meaningful part of their visit, said president and chief executive Mary Pat Higgins. This technology ensures that can continue, she said.

"Our survivors are aging, and so in 20 years we won't have any survivors who are still able to do that themselves," she said.

Smith said the images can appear on a flat screen or be projected in a way that appears to be 3-D, or 3-dimensional. Like Illinois, Dallas is building a special theater so the image will appear in 3-D on a stage.

Smith said the technology involved is simpler than many people think.

"It's actually video that responds to human voice commands," he said. "And all that's happening is rather than you watching a linear testimony, all the bits of the testimony are broken up." When someone asks it a question, it finds that piece of video and plays it for you, he said.

JT Buzanga works at the Holocaust Museum Houston. Buzanga said the uniqueness of the interactive testimonies gives visitors a reason to return.

People Make A Connection And Come Back

"It's something that makes the connection that people want to remember and want to come back," Buzanga said.

Glauben, who has made it his mission to tell people about the Holocaust, helped to found the Dallas museum. He says that after he lost his family, he told himself he would "do anything possible to educate the people and let them know what kind of tragedy this was."