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Spielberg's 'Schindler' Bequest

Spielberg's Foundation Preserves Holocaust Survivors' Stories on Film

By KAREN JONES NOVEMBER. 7, 2014



Stephen Spielberg greeted students at an event to promote IWitness, a free Internet-based platform that allows students access to survivor testimonies for use in subjects like English, history and civics studies. Credit Kim Fox

With blockbusters that include “E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial,” “Raiders of the Lost Ark” and “Saving Private Ryan,” [Steven Spielberg](#) has garnered nearly every accolade Hollywood can bestow. It was 1993’s “Schindler’s List,” however, that gave the director the opportunity to create a very different legacy — “something I was put on this earth to do,” Mr. Spielberg said.

“Schindler’s List” is based on the true story of Oskar Schindler, a German industrialist who saved more than 1,000 Jews from the Nazi death camps during [World War II](#). It won seven Academy Awards, including best picture and best director, and lit the spark for what is now the U.S.C. Shoah Foundation-The Institute for Visual History and Education.

While filming “Schindler’s List” in Poland, Mr. Spielberg was visited by Holocaust survivors eager to have their stories told, and some survivors appeared at the end of the film. Mr. Spielberg fulfilled a promise to give them a voice by establishing the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation in 1994 to film and preserve first-person survivor testimonies and encourage their use in education.

Mr. Spielberg wanted each survivor’s life story recorded, not just war experiences. An international team of interviewers collected the accounts into the Visual History Archive, more than 53,000 stories from Holocaust survivors in more than 50 countries and more than 30 languages. After the herculean task of compiling the initial testimonies was completed, Mr. Spielberg felt the time was right “for Shoah to graduate and go to the next level,” said C. L. Max Nikias, president of the University of Southern California.

Shoah became part of the university in 2006, moving from Universal Studios, to ensure the digital preservation of the Visual History Archive and make the most of its educational potential, with over 109,000 hours of video testimony. Mr. Spielberg is a trustee of the university. The archive is a global resource for teachers, students and scholars, said Dr. Nikias. “There are over 400 universities on four continents that utilize it,” he said.

Stephen D. Smith, executive director of the institute, said the archive was used for educational purposes through IWitness, a free Internet-based platform started by the institute in 2012 that allows students access to survivor testimonies for use in subjects like English, history and civics studies. More than 22,000 students in nearly 60 countries have used IWitness.

“Viewing testimony personalizes the past in a way that a textbook or a film cannot,” said Michelle Sadrena Clark, who teaches United States history and American literature at High Tech High North County in San Marcos, Calif. “A human being is the most dynamic textbook. If students can connect, they can care.”

Mrs. Clark says she believes that viewing survivor testimonies has made her students “more tolerant of different ethnicities and different backgrounds, and more grateful for the opportunities they have.” The institute started incorporating survivors’ testimonies from other genocides in 2013 and recently began the Center for Advanced Genocide Research with initial funding from

the U.S.C. Shoah Foundation and other sources. The genocide center provides an academic forum for experts to study how mass violence occurs.

“We are not an advocacy organization, but by collecting testimony of those who experience violent societies and archiving them in a trusted repository accessible by advocacy groups, policy makers and peacekeepers, we can provide a timely voice,” said Dr. Smith.

Timed for the 20th anniversary of the U.S.C. Shoah Foundation and the wide release of “Schindler’s List” in 1994, the genocide center will hold its inaugural international conference this month.

In an interview, Mr. Spielberg expressed satisfaction with the last two decades of effort. “Collecting the testimonies was the start, but it would have meant nothing if others didn’t hear or did not learn from them,” Mr. Spielberg said. “It is very gratifying when students respond, when they find parallels from the Holocaust and all the things occurring today that can create the tinderbox for another genocide.”

Sherry Amatenstein, a therapist, conducted 66 interviews with survivors for the institute over two years. A child of Holocaust survivors herself, she said that though the interview process was emotionally draining, “I knew how important it was for survivors to give testimony. Many survived because they wanted to believe there was some goodness and light in the world and that they survived for a reason.”

Celina Biniiaz was the youngest female on Oskar Schindler’s list. When she and 300 other women were sent to Auschwitz, Oskar Schindler intervened and arranged for their transfer to his munitions factory until the end of the war. Mrs. Biniiaz later emigrated to the United States.

An early participant in providing testimony, Mrs. Biniiaz, 83, calls Mr. Spielberg “a second Schindler” for what he has done for survivors. Today when she talks publicly about her experiences, she emphasizes that “revenge and hatred are corrosive and do not let you move forward.”

Mr. Spielberg said he was grateful to have been in a position to help survivors like Mrs. Biniash. When asked how he felt about being called “a second Schindler,” he said, “It’s a beautiful thing to say, and it makes me feel proud, yet humbled. I feel like I have 53,000 grandparents.”

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