Institute for Visual History and Education is dedicated to making audio-visual interviews with survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust and other genocides a compelling voice for education and action.

Leading Change Through Testimony

The Institute currently has more than 53,000 video testimonies, each one a unique source of insight and knowledge that offers powerful stories from history that demand to be explored and shared.

The testimonies are preserved in the Visual History Archive, one of the largest digital collections of its kind in the world. They average a little over two hours each in length and were conducted in 63 countries and 39 languages. The vast majority of the testimonies contain a complete personal history of life before, during, and after the interviewee’s firsthand experience with genocide.

The Visual History Archive is digitized, fully searchable via indexed keywords, and hyperlinked to the minute. With more than 112,000 hours of testimony stored in the Archive, indexing technology is essential for enabling users to pinpoint topics of interest.

Indexing allows students, teachers, professors, researchers and others around the world to retrieve entire testimonies or search for specific sections within testimonies through a set of nearly 64,000 keywords and phrases, 1.8 million names, and 695,000 images.

Each testimony is indexed by a native speaker and each minute of video is time-coded in English to a proprietary search engine using Institute-patented technology.

The bulk of the video testimonies expound on the Holocaust, including such experiences as Jewish Survivors, Rescuers and Aid-Providers, Sinti and Roma Survivors, Librators, Political Prisoners, Jehovah’s Witness Survivors, War Crimes Trial Participants, Eugenic Policies Survivors, Non-Jewish Forced Laborers and Homosexual Survivors. But the Visual History Archive has expanded to include testimonies from the 1994 Rwandan Tutsi Genocide, the 1937 Nanjing Massacre and the Armenian Genocide that coincided with World War I. Plans to integrate testimonies from other genocides, including Cambodia and Guatemala are in development. The Visual History Archive is also integrating additional Holocaust testimonies through a program called Preserving the Legacy, in which USC Shoah Foundation has begun digitizing and indexing testimony taken and owned by other institutions to preserve them and make more accessible to scholars, students, educators and the general public.

Each collection adds context for the other, providing multiple pathways for students, educators and scholars to learn from the eyewitnesses of history across time, locations, cultures and socio-political circumstances.

Ultimately, the Visual History Archive forever preserves the faces and voices of the people who witnessed history, allowing their firsthand stories to enlighten and inspire action against intolerance for generations to come.

Leveraging the world-class faculty and scholarly resources of its home at the University of Southern California, within the Dana and David Dornsife College of Letters, Arts

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and Sciences, and with the vital support of the philanthropic community, the Institute strives to understand and share the insights contained within the Visual History Archive through four strategic priorities: Research, Education, Access and Global Outreach.

Teaching the World Through Testimony

“The survivors gave us their testimonies so that we would tell the world and educate future generations twenty, fifty, a hundred years from now and beyond. The testimonies go beyond what you can find in a book, beyond what you can see on a blackboard, beyond what you can type on a tablet.”

—Stephen Smith, executive director USC Shoah Foundation

Using testimony from the Visual History Archive, the Institute has developed innovative learning tools geared toward middle and high school students and teacher training programs that optimize the use of testimony in diverse educational settings worldwide — providing an experience that takes students beyond textbooks for more impactful learning.

IWitness is the Institute’s signature educational website for teachers and their students. The free site has been used by students and educators in all 50 states and over 60 countries including Poland, Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, Hungary, Australia and France.

Stored on the IWitness platform are 1,600 full-length testimonies from the Visual History Archive. The platform’s built-in learning activities are designed around short, curated clips.

IWitness learning activities enhance existing curriculum across many subject areas including social studies, English Language Arts, government, foreign language, world history, American history, and character education.

Student assignments vary by learning activity but include writing short essays, building word clouds, analyzing photos, creating art projects, writing poetry, making sound collages and constructing video essays. The activities go beyond expanding a student’s base of knowledge; they build competencies such as effective searching, archival curation and ethical editing, skills necessary for success in the 21st century.

IWitness also has a built-in video editor, enabling students to construct video essays using video clips, photos, music, voiceover narration and text that they have curated.

The Institute’s other education programs include:

• Teaching with Testimony in the 21st Century – A two-year professional development program to help educators build their capacity to use testimony and digital learning tools such as IWitness appropriately and effectively in their learning environments.

• ITeach – A one-day seminar that includes an introduction to USC Shoah Foundation’s educational programs, the Visual History Archive, methodology, social psychology and pedagogical theory, and the introduction of a testimony-based lesson a teacher has already developed.

• IWalk – An interactive education program that connects the Visual History Archive and other primary sources, to physical locations with memories of historical events that took place on these locations in several European cities. IWalks have been created in Budapest, Hungary; Prague in the Czech Republic; and Warsaw, Poland.

• Teacher Innovation Network – A system created by the Institute to foster collaboration among teachers around the world who have intersected with the Institute’s education programs. Membership is automatic based on educators’ participation in the Institute’s professional-development programs or their registration in IWitness. Monthly e-blasts keep members updated on the activities of the Institute, and invite dialogue among educators.

• Echoes and Reflections – A Holocaust-
focused multimedia professional development program providing secondary teachers in the United States with accurate and authentic Holocaust information for their classrooms. Developed by the USC Shoah Foundation, Yad Vashem, and the Anti-Defamation League, Echoes and Reflections hold workshops around the country at no cost to teachers or schools. Participants receive a complimentary copy of the 10-part Teacher's Resource Guide.

Exploring the Depth of Testimony

The Center for Advanced Genocide Research is the research and scholarship unit of the Institute.

Founded in 2014, the Center is dedicated to advancing new areas of interdisciplinary research on the Holocaust and genocide, specifically discussing the origins of genocide and how to intervene in the cycle that leads to mass violence.

The Center holds international conferences and workshops and hosts fellows and scholars in residence to conduct research using the vast resources available at the University of Southern California. It distinguishes itself by focusing on interdisciplinary study organized around three themes to advance the analysis of genocide and systematic mass violence on an international scale

• Resistance to Genocide and Mass Violence focuses on acts of resistance and elements of defiance that slow down or stop genocidal processes.
• Violence, Emotion and Behavioral Change studies the nature of genocide and mass violence and how they impact emotional, social, psychological, historical and physical behavior.
• Digital Genocide Studies examines how big data and large datasets, including the 53,000 testimonies in the USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive, can be used to find patterns in the field of mass violence and its resistance.

The Institute also organizes a yearly series of academic events that brings leading scholars to USC to present lectures, film screenings and panel discussions.

Sharing and Preserving Testimony

The Visual History Archive is fully viewable at 51 subscribing institutions in 13 countries around the world, mainly universities and museums.

The Institute also offers a subscription for partial access to the Archive. About 211 institutions in 34 countries have contracted for these smaller collections.

About 1,200 testimonies are also available to any member of the public with an Internet connection who registers to access the Visual History Archive Online. The free registration form can be found on the Institute’s website.

In addition to broadening its reach, the Institute dedicates considerable attention to maintaining each testimony’s audio-visual quality, to protect it from degrading over time. With contributions from technology companies, the Institute devised a preservation system where the original videos were digitized into a variety of commonly used formats. The digitization of the entire Archive took five years to complete, from 2008 to 2012.

During the digitization project, it was discovered that about 5 percent of the 235,005 tapes had audio or visual problems, some to the point of being unwatchable. Finding there were few existing options for restoring tape-based material, the Institute’s ITS team created new software programs to help them recover both audio and visual problems.

To ensure that the world’s largest database of genocide testimony lives in perpetuity, the Institute has created a digital collections-management technology that is so cutting edge USC now uses it to accommodate a wide array of clients eager to preserve their aging media. Among them are the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences and Warner Bros. Pictures.

Also under the Access umbrella is the Institute’s collections unit, which works to expand the Visual History Archive by conducting additional interviews, integrating
testimony taken by other institutions, and providing training on the Institute’s preferred methodology for gathering testimony.

Extending the Conversation of Testimony

With an eye toward expanding its audience, USC Shoah Foundation broadcasts its content across many platforms.

In 2015, to underscore this priority, the Institute added Global Outreach as its fourth organizational pillar. The progress has been remarkable. In one year — between 2013-14 and 2014-15 — the number of people intersecting with the Institute’s testimony nearly doubled, from 3.6 million to 6.5 million. The number increases to 15 million when including media exposure, TV broadcasts, museum exhibits, presentations at conferences and workshops, and social media.

Global outreach is conducted through owned media such as websites and Institute-supported documentaries and exhibits; earned media including prominent national and international press coverage about its programs; and shared media distributed across a wide range of social platforms.

• On a daily basis, the Institute posts stories and blogs about projects and people, as well as a new clip of testimony culled from the Visual History Archive.
• The Institute boasts a strong following on Facebook and Twitter, and recently launched an Instagram account.
• In 2014 the Institute initiated a successful social media campaign called #BeginsWithMe to engage with the millennial generation.

USC Shoah Foundation and Comcast launched a five-year partnership in 2014 to annually bring programming to millions of customers over the course of seven weeks in the spring commemorating Genocide Awareness Month. Each year, the series is themed with a feature film anchoring the program offerings. The 2015 theme, Music, was anchored by The Pianist and introduced by actor Adrien Brody, who won an Oscar for his role in the film.

To expand its reach further and continue placing testimony at the forefront of its global engagement efforts, the Institute seeks to accelerate media production to generate new testimony-based content across multiple channels.