USC Shoah Foundation

The Institute for Visual History and Education

INTERVIEWER GUIDELINES

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Updated: October 25, 2012

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Conducting Oral Histories

Each oral history project is unique. Those who initiate an oral history project should take into account its particular objectives and identify the specific knowledge and background needed for conducting interviews. Learning how to conduct an oral history interview takes time and practice. Although this is not an instructional guide, it is a detailed description of procedures for conducting videotaped interviews. We hope that it will be useful to anyone engaged in an oral history project.

About USC Shoah Foundation

USC Shoah Foundation, with nearly 52,000 videotaped testimonies from Holocaust survivors and other witnesses, is the largest visual history archive in the world. The mission of the Institute is to overcome prejudice, intolerance, and bigotry—and the suffering they cause—through the educational use of the Institute's visual history testimonies.

More than 2,000 interviewers in 24 countries were trained by USC Shoah Foundation to collect testimonies. These interviewers came from a variety of backgrounds and professions in the fields of education, history, journalism, psychology, and others. Interviewers attended an intensive training session covering history, interviewing methodology, and practical exercises. Ongoing support, training, and guidelines were provided by the Interviewer Resources Department, which was also responsible for monitoring the quality of the interviews.

With support from leading Holocaust historians and other oral history projects, the Institute developed a methodology for structuring and conducting interviews with Holocaust survivors and other witnesses. Each testimony captures a life history and describes events before, during, and after the war. The information found in this manual was presented to interviewer candidates who attended interviewer training sessions. It provides guidelines for interviewing and describes USC Shoah Foundation's policies and procedures.

The Interviewing Process

The interview process comprises four stages:

1. The Pre-Interview
2. Research and Preparation
3. The Interview
4. After the Interview

STAGE 1: THE PRE-INTERVIEW

Before the interview, the interviewer conducts a pre-interview. The purpose of the pre-interview includes the following:

- To meet and establish a rapport with the interviewee
- To explain the format of the interview
- To review the logistics of the interview
- To gather basic facts about the interviewee's life
- To fill out the Pre-Interview Questionnaire (PIQ)

Making Arrangements for the Pre-Interview

The pre-interview is usually conducted about a week prior to the interview. Interviewers are encouraged to conduct the pre-interview in person, usually in the interviewee's home. If a face-to-face meeting is not possible, the pre-interview can be conducted by phone. Interviewers should be sensitive about appropriate times to call, and not call on religious holidays, early in the morning, or late in the evening.

Setting the Tone at the Pre-Interview

Establishing trust and a rapport with the interviewee is essential for a successful interview. For interviewers, this relationship begins with the first contact. The interviewer should work to find the right balance between a familiar and a formal approach. A respectful, relaxed, and friendly attitude should be adopted and maintained throughout the relationship with the interviewee.

Dress is an important component of demeanor, and interviewers should dress in conservative, professional, and comfortable attire. Interviewers should be aware of cultural sensitivities pertaining to respectful attire.

Documents for the Pre-Interview

The interviewer brings two documents to the pre-interview: the Pre-Interview Questionnaire (PIQ) and the Release Agreement.

- **The Pre-Interview Questionnaire (PIQ)**

The Pre-Interview Questionnaire was designed to gather specific biographical information about the interviewee, and to serve as a guide for the interviewer. The information gathered from the PIQ is the interviewer's "road map" to the interviewee's life story. It provides the interviewer with a general chronology of the interviewee's life, as well as the names of the immediate family, place names where the interviewee grew up, information about education, social, and religious background, etc. The interviewer should fill out the PIQ with the interviewee and also use it to confirm the spellings of names and locations.

The PIQ guides the interviewer's research and preparation for the actual interview. For example, interviewers research and read about the interviewee's city of birth in order to gain a broad perspective of the historical, political, social, and cultural forces at work in the interviewee's prewar life. This information, in turn, helps to generate specific questions that the interviewer will incorporate into the interview.

Many interviewees are tempted to tell their stories during the pre-interview. Interviewers should ask them to save their stories for the actual on-camera interview.

- **The Release Agreement**

While USC Shoah Foundation does not own the interviewee's life story, it does maintain the copyright to the videotaped interview. As a courtesy, however, the Institute attempts to notify interviewees about the use of their testimonies in educational projects or products.

At the pre-interview, the Release Agreement is given to the interviewee for review. Two original copies of the Release Agreement are signed by the interviewee and by any family member before appearing on camera. The interviewee and the family members, when applicable, keep one copy; the other Release Agreement, the PIQ, and the videotapes are returned to the Los Angeles office.

Conveying the Interview Format and the Procedures

The pre-interview provides the interviewer with an opportunity to inform the interviewee about what to expect when the interview is videotaped. Points that should be discussed include:

1. The interview encompasses the interviewee's entire life history: prewar experience, war time experience, and postwar experience. The interviewee is asked to think about incidents and stories that he or she wishes to include in the interview.
2. The interview date and time is confirmed with the interviewee.
3. The interviewer will arrive with the camera operator (videographer) and the videographer's assistant. Approximately 30 minutes will be needed to set up the equipment and 20 minutes to pack up the equipment.
4. Interviews are conducted individually, e.g. only one interviewee is videotaped per interview.
5. The only people who will be allowed in the room during the interview are the interviewee, the interviewer, the camera operator, and the camera assistant.

6. In order to avoid distractions during the taping, the ringer on the telephone will need to be shut off (with the interviewee's permission).
7. The Release Agreement will be presented for signature before the interview begins.
8. Tape changes will occur every 30 minutes.
9. Additional questions and clarifications will be asked during the interview when necessary.
10. Reflective questions will be asked at the end of the interview. These may include questions about a message to future generations.
11. With the interviewee's permission, family members (if available) will be invited to appear on camera for the last few minutes of the interview.
12. Personal photographs and/or artifacts, when available, should be considered for inclusion at the end of the interview. These items could include photos of parents, siblings, children, and grandchildren, as well as relevant artifacts such as passports, birth and death certificates, badges, false papers, family heirlooms, or anything the interviewee deems appropriate. Such items are usually discussed during the pre-interview.
13. Interviewees are advised to avoid wearing all white, solid red, or white and black checks.
14. The interviewer fills out the PIQ and the interviewee checks the spelling of proper names and places.

STAGE 2: RESEARCH AND PREPARATION

After completing the pre-interview, the interviewer should have a good sense of the interviewee's general experience. Preparation and research are vital to conducting oral history interviews. There are many factors that should be taken into consideration. Three of the most important ones are understanding the historical context, establishing the "profile" of the interview, and assessing the interviewee's narrative style.

Researching the Historical Context

Understanding the broader historical context is important in conducting interviews with Holocaust survivors and other witnesses. Based on what is learned at the pre-interview, interviewers research countries, cities, camps, ghettos, and other pertinent information. The Institute has developed several topical question documents that reflect specific historical events. If the interview includes topics that require more specialized research, historians work with the interviewer to obtain the necessary information.

Establishing the Profile of the Interviewee

Interviewers familiarize themselves with the interviewee's personal, religious, educational, and socio-economic background. The interviewee's age at the time of the historical event also helps the interviewer understand the interviewee's perspective about his/her experience. A survivor who was eight years old at the outbreak of World War II saw and understood his/her world differently than someone who was 15 or 20 years old.

Interviewers generally follow the chronology of the interviewee's experience, and identify those experiences that are central to the person's life. Holocaust survivors who were adults before 1939, for example, require more focus on the prewar period than survivors who were children during the war.

Preparing Topical Questions

Although the interviews are not scripted, interviewers are trained to prepare appropriate questions and topics of conversation in advance of the interview.

The interviewee is encouraged to talk about prewar events and personal memories, including family, home life, education, community, religious practices and beliefs, politics, and experiences with anti-Semitism, among other topics.

The interviewee is asked to speak about his or her experiences under German occupation. The range of topics is broad, yet specific to each individual. Some survivors fled before the war began. After the war began, some survivors were in ghettos, camps, or in hiding. Others passed as non-Jews or were in resistance groups. Also, survivors are asked about significant moments: deportations, separation from family, and liberation from the camps. Other witnesses (e.g., liberators, war crimes trials participants, rescuers, and aid providers) are asked questions appropriate to their experiences.

Questions about displaced persons camps, emigration, work and career, marriages, and children are among the topics addressed by interviewers in the postwar section of the interview. Questions concerning faith and meaning, dreams, and messages to future generations (reflective topics) are asked toward the end of the interview.

Each interviewer develops his or her own style. However, the Institute advises that it may not be necessary to bring a long list of questions to the interview. Instead, many interviewers prefer to prepare index cards with topics, key questions, and brief notes that serve as memory aids during the interview.

Assessing the Narrative Style of the Interviewee

Interviewers assess the amount of guidance the interviewee might need to answer questions and adapt the interviewing techniques accordingly. A few examples are outlined in the chart below.

When the interviewee needs…	The interviewer should…
Little/No Guidance The interviewee is eloquent, forthcoming, focused, and the testimony flows.	…listen and follow the interview, ask fewer questions; clarify, follow up, and ask questions based on research.
Some Guidance The interviewee jumps around to different time periods or speaks about general events, rather than first-hand experiences.	…guide the interviewee to give eyewitness testimony and maintain the chronology of events.
Strong Guidance The interviewee has difficulty expressing him/herself due to language, health, or emotional condition; there are lapses in memory; interviewee jumps from topic to topic.	…interject and ask more specific questions; maintain chronology of events …use tape breaks to discuss the progress of the interview with interviewee.

Structuring the Interview

Most interviews in USC Shoah Foundation's archive average 2 to 2½ hours but can be longer depending on the experience and memory of the interviewee. Interviewers adapt the amount of time dedicated to each period based on many factors, including the complexity of the story, the interviewee's age during that period, and his/her memory of particular events.

The Institute generally conducts the interview in one visit. However, in rare instances, more than one visit may be required.

Practical Matters

In order for the interviewer and the interviewee to focus on the most important aspect of the experience, the actual interview, the Institute offers the following practical advice to its interviewers.

- The night before the interview, call the interviewee to confirm the appointment for the interview.
- Allow enough travel time to arrive to the interview on time.
- Try not to schedule any appointments during the few hours following the interview.
- Get a good night's sleep.

Interviews require an unobtrusive, sensitive, and polite interviewer. The interviewer's questioning style is critical to a professional and thoughtful interview. The ideal interview consists of open-ended questions that allow the interviewee's testimony to flow.

The Institute has interviewed people from a variety of social and educational backgrounds, who had varying levels of language skills. Interviewers are expected to be attentive to these differences, and to adjust the manner in which they phrase questions. Certain interviewing methods, however, apply to all interviews.

Interview Technique

Interviewers are instructed to avoid a "question and answer" session. Rather than ask "did you," "could you," "were you" questions, interviewers utilize such open-ended phrasing as "tell me about," or "please describe." The interviewer encourages the interviewee to speak at length in a narrative style, as well as to share his or her reactions to what s/he witnessed.

Interviewers are trained to avoid asking leading questions, as well as multi-sectioned questions. It is much better to ask one question at a time.

Interviewers are encouraged to use questions that clarify, probe, and follow-up in order to elicit more details. Clarifying questions are used to check the spellings, dates, and to establish timeframes of the events that are described. Probing questions elicit information in greater depth, and are utilized to ask the interviewee to reflect upon events. Follow-up questions encourage the interviewee to elaborate on relevant topics that have been mentioned only briefly in the testimony.

If the interviewee cannot recall a particular fact about his/her experience, or says something historically inaccurate (e.g., an incorrect date or fact), the interviewer should refrain from directly correcting or confronting the interviewee. Instead, interviewers are encouraged to try to verify the correct information gently, by asking a clarifying question, or to probe deeper in order to trigger the memory.

As previously mentioned, demeanor contributes to the success of an interview. Interviewers are trained not to be judgmental or to assume that they know what the interviewee is going to say next.

Interviewers are instructed to avoid audible sounds such as "uh huh," "umm," "right," "yes," etc. that are common in everyday conversation. Interviewers should be mindful not to interrupt or talk over the interviewee; silences or pauses are often the most effective ways to elicit information from the interviewee. It also allows the interviewee time to think, reflect, and recall memories.

The interviewer's comments (except for questions) should be kept to a minimum. Nonverbal communication, however, is of utmost importance. Nodding the head, using hand gestures, and maintaining eye contact encourages the interviewee to continue, and shows the interviewee that the interviewer is attentive and engaged.

Occasionally, an interviewee speaks about people or places not documented in the Pre-Interview Questionnaire. Interviewers are instructed to try and jot down these names during the interview, while maintaining eye contact. After the interview is completed, the interviewer should verify the spelling of these names with the interviewee and include this information in the "post-interview information" section of the PIQ.

Since the videotaped interviews are preserved in their entirety and not edited, videotaping should continue if an interviewee becomes emotional or needs a moment to collect his or her thoughts. The interviewer should continue to use nonverbal communication rather than attempt to comfort the interviewee verbally. To ensure its integrity, the interview should not be stopped except in case of an emergency or if the interviewee absolutely cannot continue.

Furthermore, if the interviewee becomes very emotional, the interviewer should remain seated and continue to listen, even if there is a long pause and silence. The interviewee should continue to use nonverbal communication and refrain from the urge to use verbal cues to comfort the interviewee, such as "It's okay" or "I understand." The interview can be stopped only if the interviewee insists; the interviewer should not suggest it.

There may be moments in the interview when the interviewee's experiences will make the interviewer uncomfortable and may be extremely difficult to hear. In such situations, the interviewer's natural reaction to the story is acceptable, as long as it is not distracting to the interviewee. It is important for the interviewer to be conscious of his/her own emotions and to focus on the interviewee and the flow of the interview.

In cases where the interviewee wrote poetry, played music, produced art, etc. during the war, the interviewer can encourage the interviewee to share his/her work on camera. The interviewer always asks if the interviewee would like to share it at the conclusion of the interview.

Sometimes the chronology of the story can be disrupted and the story becomes unclear. The interviewer should then ask for clarification by saying, "Please correct me if I've misunderstood, but did you say…?" "And then you went to…?" or "Tell me once again, who is …? If appropriate, the interviewer should simply ask for the exact dates.

In cases when the interviewee is struggling and cannot remember a word or the translation of a word, the interviewer should patiently give the interviewee a chance to remember. If the interviewee cannot remember and the interviewer knows the word, s/he should say it.

Working with the Videographer

The Institute has prepared technical guidelines for videography. It specifies the required equipment and outlines the policies and procedures for the videographer.

Coordination between the interviewer, videographer, and videographer's assistant is essential. The videographer and videographer's assistant should meet outside the interview location, usually the interviewee's home, at the scheduled time. They share pertinent information, such as whether the interviewee's family will appear on camera and whether photographs and/or artifacts will be included. The videographer's assistant meets the family outside the interview site so that the interview is not disrupted.

The interviewer and videographer should determine with the interviewee the best place to set up the equipment and conduct the interview. The location should reflect the videographer's specific technical considerations for sound and lighting. The interviewer should sit close to, and at the same height as, the camera lens. This configuration should ensure that the interviewee does not seem to be looking away from the camera.

The videographer is in charge of changing tapes, and the interviewing team decides upon a signal that causes the least disruption to the interview, such as a tap on the interviewer's shoulder two minutes before the end of each tape. (USC Shoah Foundation interviews were recorded on 30-minute Betacam SP videotapes, the standard format between 1994 and 1999.)

While the videographer sets up the equipment, the interviewer works with the interviewee to organize the photographs, documents, and artifacts in chronological order.

The videographer should be mindful of any potential sound disturbances. With the interviewee's permission, the telephone, noisy appliances, clock chimes, etc. should be shut off. A "Please Do Not Disturb" sign should be taped to the front door.

Because the interviewer is in close proximity to the microphone, s/he also needs to be aware of the distracting noises caused by rustling papers, jewelry, etc.

Tissues and a glass of water should be placed where they can be reached easily by the interviewee.

Beginning the Interview

A slate is displayed on camera at the beginning of the interview. The slate includes the following data:

- Date of interview
- Interviewee's name
- Name at birth
- Interviewer's name
- City, state or province, and country where the interview is being conducted
- Language of the interview

The interviewer checks that all names are spelled correctly on the slate before the interview begins. The videographer then films the slate as the interviewer reads it aloud. After the slating, the interviewer briefly appears on camera with the interviewee. The interviewer introduces him/herself, announces the date, introduces the interviewee, and states the location (city, state/province, and country), as well as the language of the interview. After these preliminary statements, the camera is focused on the interviewee for the entire interview; the interviewer remains off-camera.

Interviews begin with the following introductory questions:

- What is your name (and spelling)?
- What was your name at birth (and spelling)?
- Did you have any nicknames as a child?
- What is your date of birth?
- What is your current age?
- What is your city (and spelling) and country of birth?

After the questions specified above, the interviewer asks for the name of the interviewee's father, mother (including the maiden name), siblings (and their birth order), as well as the names of people in the household (extended family members, household help, etc.), and grandparents. The professions of the father and mother of the interviewee are also sought from the interviewee.

Tape Changes

Approximately 1-2 minutes before the end of the tape, the videographer alerts the interviewer in a nonverbal manner that a tape change is imminent. This allows time for the interviewee to finish his/her thought. The interviewer then announces the tape break (e.g., "We'll stop now and go to the next tape.").

The interviewer should use the tape breaks to give the interviewee encouragement, and to point out topics that may have been omitted and topics that will be covered in the next tape.

At the beginning of each tape, the interviewer should introduce the tape by announcing the interviewee's name and the tape number only (e.g., "Interview with Max Smith, tape 2").

Once the tape is rolling, the interviewer reminds the interviewee where s/he left off when the last tape ended: "Mr. Smith, you were talking about…."

Concluding the Interview

The interviewer concludes the testimony by asking the interviewee if there is anything else s/he would like to add that has not been covered in the interview. After the final statement, the interviewer concludes the interview with a simple "thank you."

After the camera is shut off, the interviewer verifies the spelling of names and geographic place names that were mentioned during the interview and not included in the Pre-Interview Questionnaire. This information is added to the "post-interview information" section of the PIQ.

Photographs and Artifacts Segment

The items included in this section of the interview usually consist of memorabilia of prewar family and community life, wartime, hiding, ghetto, immediate postwar, immigration experiences, as well as postwar and contemporary photographs.

After the interview, the videographer films the photographs, documents, artifacts, and/or mementos. Items are usually presented in chronological order. During taping, the items should not be hand held, but placed on a secure board. Each item is filmed individually, while the interviewee describes the item off-camera. Descriptions about how the interviewee obtained the photo or artifact (especially if it is a prewar photo) often generate additional and descriptive detail about the individual's life experiences, possibly not covered in the interview itself.

The interviewer prompts the interviewee to identify each photograph in the following manner:

- First and last names of persons in the photo
- Date the photo was taken
- Place the photo was taken
- How the photo was obtained (if taken before or during the war)
- Other information the interviewee would like to share about the item

Family Members Segment

If available and amenable, many interviewees include family members in this final segment of the videotape.

Additional chairs are positioned next to the interviewee for the family members. If there is a large group, the interviewer helps arrange the group, usually with the interviewee (and spouse, when applicable) in the center, surrounded by relatives, much like a family portrait.

The interviewee should introduce each family member by name and relationship.

The family members segment varies from interview to interview. Often, family members make personal statements about being the children of survivors. Relatives sometimes speak about the interviewee and their feelings about his/her giving testimony. In some instances, grandchildren share comments, a poem, or a song honoring the grandparent. Although married couples give separate personal testimonies, they often join in the family segment of each other's interview.

Stage 4: AFTER THE INTERVIEW

After the interview ends, the interviewer remains until the videographer packs the equipment and the interviewee's home is put back in order. Interviewers use the time to thank the interviewee for the interview and to ensure that the Pre-Interview Questionnaire has been properly and fully completed.

The completed PIQ and one copy of the signed Release Agreement are given to the videographer, who is responsible for shipping the paperwork, along with the videotapes, to the Los Angeles office. The interviewee is advised that a copy of his/her videotaped interview will be sent to him/her within a few months.

In order to provide additional support to the interviewee, a list of local psychological resources is offered, should the interviewee wish to talk to a mental health professional about the experience of giving testimony.

Interviewers are instructed to call a day or so after the interview to thank the interviewee for his/her testimony. Many interviewers send a thank-you note as well. Often, strong bonds and long-lasting friendships develop as a result of the experience shared during the interview process.

The interviewing process can also be intense and exhausting for the interviewer. Interviewers are encouraged to take time for themselves after the interview.

Understanding the importance of peer support, the Institute periodically arranged interviewer and videographer gatherings. At these gatherings, interviewers and videographers have not only exchanged helpful tips, resources and information, but have also shared with one another the thoughts and experiences that resulted from such emotional and responsible work.

For more information about USC Shoah Foundation, please visit our website at sfi.usc.edu.

