

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT

REFUGEE VOICES *THE ASSOCIATION OF JEWISH REFUGEES* *AUDIO-VISUAL TESTIMONY ARCHIVE*

'Refugee Voices' is a collection of 150 filmed interviews with former refugees from Nazism now living in Britain. All the interviews, the interview summaries and transcripts, and the interviewees' database have been digitized and are now available for use (see the website: www.ajr.org.uk/refugeevoices). This paper describes the background and general methodology of the project and gives an introduction to the 'Refugee Voices' in this valuable oral history archive.

Background

In 2002 Dr Anthony Grenville, Dr Bea Lewkowicz, and Carol Seigel curated the exhibition 'Continental Britons: Jewish Refugees from Nazi Europe', which was funded by the Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR) and shown at the Jewish Museum. The exhibition contained a film made by Dr Lewkowicz, 53 minutes long and consisting of edited extracts from 16 specially conducted interviews with former refugees ('Continental Britons: Refugee Voices'). Following the success of the film, Dr Anthony Grenville and Dr Bea Lewkowicz submitted the proposal for 'Refugee Voices', a large-scale video oral history project, to the AJR. The AJR, the organization that has represented the Jewish refugees from Hitler in Britain since 1941, appreciated the importance of creating a resource that would memorialize the history and experience of the refugees and commissioned this project. The first interview was carried out in January 2003.

The remit of the project was to conduct 120 interviews (subsequently increased to 150) as widely as possible across the entire UK, avoiding too exclusive a concentration on north-west London, the principal area of refugee settlement. Consequently, there is a balance between the number of interviews carried out in London and the south-east and those carried out in the Midlands, the north of England, Scotland, and other regions. The spread of the interviews

ranges from Glasgow and Edinburgh to Winchester and Southend, from Batley and Knaresborough to Bristol and Cardiff. A considerable number of interviews were filmed in the Manchester area, some of them with members of the local Orthodox Jewish community, a group thus far under-represented in collections of interviews with German-Jewish refugees.

A further aim of 'Refugee Voices' was to record the experiences of the 'ordinary people' who form the bulk of the refugee community in Britain, and not only to concentrate on the prominent and high-achieving refugees, only a handful of whom were interviewed for the 'Refugee Voices' collection (for example, the film set designer Ken Adam). Most of the interviewees have never been interviewed before, and very few on film.

Methodology

The development of oral history in the UK is clearly linked to the development of *Alltagsgeschichte* and 'history from below', which attempted to give voice to marginalized groups, to 'give history back to the people in their own words' (Paul Thompson). At the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, some oral historians challenged the pure 'recovery' and 'gathering' focus of oral history and asserted that memory should be moved to the centre stage of analysis and not only remain the method of oral history. These methodological developments suggested that the purpose of the 'Refugee Voices' interviews needed to be two-fold:

- a) To gather evidence of historical experiences not widely recorded (of the emigration and settlement of German-speaking refugees in the UK in general and specific experiences in particular, for example, women as domestic servants, accounts of internment, refugees as POWs in Germany etc.), and
- b) To enable an individual to narrate his/her life story and reflect on his/her experiences.

Keeping in mind the aim of historical reconstruction on the one hand, and the creation of narrative memory on the other, the nature of the questions posed in the interviews was of crucial importance. They needed to be open, not suggestive, and descriptive ('Could you

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please describe . . . ?', 'What was it like . . . ?', 'How do you remember . . . ?'). Many of the interviews start with the question: 'Can you tell us about your family background?' The answers can vary from one minute to five minutes, from talking about grandparents to immediately talking about Hitler and the experience of emigration. The interviewers were also instructed to accept silences as part of the interview. The interviews vary in length from one to six hours, the average being between two and three hours. The interviews were conducted by a very small number of experienced and knowledgeable interviewers, which makes for a high degree of consistency in the quality of the interviews and the form that they take.

All the interviews are life story interviews, starting with the interviewee's family background and then following his/her life chronologically up to the time of the interview. While allowing a considerable degree of flexibility, this also ensures a broad measure of uniformity and comparability across the range of the collection overall. The interviewers and camera operators were given guidelines, which included notes about the kind of questions and the kind of shots recommended (medium head-and-shoulder shot of the interviewee throughout the interview and one wide shot at the end of the interview). The advantage of video testimony, as James Young has stated, is that unlike literary testimony (which is edited), silences are part of the image, and unlike in audio interviews, gestures, movements, and expressions provide an additional layer of interpretation.

Inspired by other video history projects, such as the Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale University (4,300 interviews), the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation's collection (52,000 interviews), and the Voice/Vision Holocaust Survivors Oral History Archive at the University of Michigan, Dearborn (300 interviews), 'Refugee Voices' is the first dedicated video archive of life histories of refugees from Nazism in the UK. It was decided very early on in the project that all interviews needed to be fully transcribed, in order to provide the best access for researchers to the raw material of the interviews.

All 150 interviews have now been fully transcribed, time-coded, and catalogued, enabling a researcher to view an interview and then to read a transcript of the words spoken in it, or vice versa. The time code in the transcripts makes it possible for a researcher to locate specific passages within an interview in a short amount of time. Accom-

panying the collection is a comprehensive database of the interviewees with 47 separate categories, including place and date of birth, parents' details, manner of emigration, prisons/camps and war experiences, as well as information about the interviewees' post-war lives, careers, families etc. The database makes a treasure trove of information easily available to researchers. They can easily locate information relevant to any number of specific areas of interest, for example Kindertransportees, domestic servants, internment on the Isle of Man, or relating to interviewees from specific locations. In this connection, one can note that the largest numbers of interviewees were born in Berlin (31) and Vienna (24), followed by other German cities, but that the places of birth extend from Britain and Belgium to the countries of Eastern Europe and to Greece, Turkey, and Carpatho-Ruthenia.

Each interview is also accompanied by still shots of photographs of family members and friends, of places of importance for the interviewee and of other items and documents of special importance in the interviewee's life. These filmed photographs, artefacts and documents furnish a rich source of images for educational or documentary purposes.

Overview

The interviews cover a very wide spectrum of experiences, including those of refugees who escaped to Britain before the outbreak of war in 1939, those who survived in hiding in occupied Europe, and those who survived the camps. The life stories of the interviewees reflect many aspects of the history of emigration and survival. Alongside those who came direct from Central Europe are people who came to Britain via Shanghai, via Palestine, and on the notorious ship *St Louis*; there are also people who were in the east of Poland in 1939, were deported to Central Asia by the Soviets and made their way to the Middle East after the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, joining the British forces there. There is an interview with a survivor who was smuggled to safety from Denmark to Sweden in the famous sea-borne rescue of Jews, an interview with a survivor who was released from Bergen-Belsen to Switzerland in January 1945 as part of a prisoner exchange, and an interview with the only surviving person who was present at the signing of the Israeli Declaration of Independence in 1948. The

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archive also features interviews with people who have rarely spoken about their experiences.

'Refugee Voices' is not an archive devoted solely to the period of National Socialism and the Holocaust. Since they explore the interviewees' entire lives, the interviews contain a large amount of material about the Jewish communities from which they came, going back well before 1933 and setting events in the various countries of origin in the context of a broader historical evolution. Similarly, the collection contains a wealth of material on the lives of the interviewees in Britain (and elsewhere) after 1945: on the manner of their settlement, the obstacles they encountered, the degree of their integration, their sense of identity, and their religious affiliation, as well as their professional development, their attitudes to Britain, Israel and their native lands, their family life, and their hopes and aspirations for their children. Some of these experiences and themes have been captured in the film 'Moments and Memories' (40 minutes long), directed by Dr Bea Lewkowicz. This film has been selected as a film resource for the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and can be ordered from the AJR.

Outlook

Completed in 2008, 'Refugee Voices' consists of more than 450 hours of film and some 7,500 pages of typed transcripts, all available in digital form. It will form a very valuable resource for academics, researchers, educationalists, and others with a professional interest in such fields as Jewish Studies, Holocaust Studies, Migration and Refugee Studies, as well as modern British, German, Austrian, and European history.

Testimonies personalize history and enrich our historical understanding of events. The research and educational value of a collection such as 'Refugee Voices' must not be underestimated. One interviewee himself points to the importance of the interviews gathered in 'Refugee Voices': 'As time goes on, the memory of those days and the importance of it will dim with time and this programme [Refugee Voices] will help to keep it in people's minds and hopefully let the future generations have a better life, in a better world' (Arnold Weinberg, Interview 61, Refugee Voices Archive).

The wealth of material that 'Refugee Voices' contains and the manner in which it has been conceived and brought into being

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should make it an indispensable tool for researchers in the field for many years to come. The Association of Jewish Refugees is to be congratulated for its foresight and generous support of the 'Refugee Voices Audio-Visual Testimony Archive'.

Anthony Grenville and Bea Lewkowicz, June 2009.