

The Ethics of Access and Display: A View from The Wiener Holocaust Library

Torsten Jugl, Photo Archivist, and Dr Christine Schmidt, Deputy Director and Head of Research

Over the last few decades, archival discourse has taught us that archives hold power over the past, but as we know, with power comes responsibility. Prompted by this workshop, we consider here the responsibility to consider ethics issues that may arise from providing access to collections, particularly the visual record, which is often readily circulated, adapted, and displayed, that originates from violent conflict situations, like wars, civil wars or genocides.

We would like to consider this issue both from the point of view of firstly, archival standards and preservation – how materials are stored, made ‘usable’ and actually ‘used’ or published – and secondly their use by the Library for research and display in exhibitions and so forth. The visual material we hold at [The Wiener Holocaust Library](#) is somewhat different from the UNTV collection in terms of content and media forms. We do not hold extensive film footage, for example. Yet some issues we grapple with are certainly relevant – in particular questions of accessibility and of ‘who owns these stories’. We will address these issues by describing our own institutional processes for taking decisions on access and display.

First, a rather unusual example from our collections – a child’s drawing from the Darfur region in Sudan.



Child's drawing from Darfur. In 2007, a collection of these drawings was accepted by the International Criminal Court as contextual evidence of the crimes committed in Darfur. WHL Collections.

The human rights organisation [Waging Peace](#) gathered these drawings in 2007 during a fact-finding mission on the war in Darfur. Nearly 500 images were created by children aged 6 to 18, when they were asked what they recently witnessed. The results are essentially hand-drawn testimonies of extreme violence and traumatic experiences. Since the collection was donated in 2014, we have made this collection available to users for different purposes. But we have balanced access with the obligation to protect the privacy of those who created the images – an obligation that stretches beyond the protection of their identities.

Today, users of archives expect online access not only to descriptions of archival items, but also to digital representations of the items themselves. But how ethical it is to meet these expectations in cases like the Darfur drawings? These images have gained publicity, particularly in the light of their being given as evidence at the International Criminal Court, and some of them

can be found online. They are still however, raw, visual testimonies of traumas suffered by minors. Their creators may have consented to the custodianship of the drawings by organisations outside of their own community, but does this also imply their consent to making all of these images accessible permanently and worldwide, through a variety of media?

We are simply unsure about this wide-ranging consent. For this reason, although the drawings are fully digitised, The Wiener Holocaust Library decided to limit accessibility to the and to make it available only in our reading room. This was a conscious attempt to limit exposure of the material on the internet as far as possible (the image above has been shared as a selected representative). It might be considered a decision not in the spirit of 'digitise and make available', but we felt it has been an ethically justifiable one.

Moving onto the question of 'ownership' of stories within archival collections, this topic is discussed largely among archivists, mainly those with collections documenting indigenous people or marginalized groups whose papers ended up in archives beyond the reach or control of their own communities. Our impression is that archivists have nearly reached an ethical consensus that current ownership of collections does not equate to ownership of the stories they contain.

This applies to the Darfur drawings at The Wiener Holocaust Library as well as to the UNTV material now held by the IWM. Certainly, the creation of these collections and their respective custodianships outside of the community they originate from are based on some level of consent. But given the time and the circumstances under which they were compiled, how informed was that consent? The intention to testify to the world may have been a driving force back then for the people represented in these materials, but is this still the case? Do intentions and the willingness to testify change over time, as cultural and personal customs regarding privacy change? And if not, are we certain that the original owners approve of the way we tell their stories based on their collections? Are we listening to their concerns and are their perspectives included in our work?

These and similar questions should be asked if we accept the premise that we do not necessarily own the stories within the collections we hold. To ensure the voices of people whose stories we curate are heard, we proposed in our talk a kind of permanent negotiation of consent. This requires the building and maintenance of robust and stable relationships with the original creators directly and/or with their wider communities. This is something we are trying to do at the Wiener Holocaust Library, and it is something IWM is doing with the UNTV collection by involving those with local knowledge, such as the International Commission for Missing Persons in Bosnia and Hercegovina, in ongoing discussions about their use.

To move on to exhibitions and our digital resources, although we are not a museum, we do curate (further mediate) and display our collections. And we understand that collections – film, photographs, documents – take on new meanings and prompt new interpretations as they are displayed in new contexts, very likely beyond what the original creators had intended.



Death Marches: Evidence and Memory exhibition at the Wiener Holocaust Library in 2021. WHL Collections.

We have a small temporary exhibition space, which doubles as a reception and events area. This unusual scenario presents additional challenges with the kinds of display the Library often wants to show. Not everyone comes to visit the exhibition, but it is a necessary path to access other areas of the building, so we have to be particularly sensitive to this when displaying material that is easily visible.

In 2021, we launched [Death Marches: Evidence and Memory](#), and included not only a presentation of the history of the marches, but also a discussion of how evidence was gathered and how we know what we know about these marches. It displayed forensic evidence of the marches (including a small number of photos of bodies and some graphic descriptions of brutality and trauma via eyewitness testimony). The testimonies and photos displayed had served specific purposes – for instance, to investigate the whereabouts of people after the war and to try to reunite them with missing family. And in some cases, such as the clandestine photos of the marches, they had served a juridical purpose - to document crimes for future prosecution.

CURATORIAL CHOICES – YOUR VIEWS

Do you think that it is essential to use “atrocious photographs” to discuss, study and display genocides?

We invite visitors to reflect and comment on this issue, and the exhibition more broadly, by visiting this link. We value your feedback and responses.



The images displayed in this exhibition include maps, testimonies, forensic reports, tracing and exhumation reports, as well as images of material remains and physical destruction of human beings. Some show clearly the brutal nature of what occurred. The curators pondered the ethics of showing such images.

Our view is that they need to be shown since they represent what the death marches were; without seeing them, one cannot understand why the “death marches” acquired their name. Some historians and museum curators feel differently, however, and believe that it is unethical to display “atrocities photographs”.

Images from the wall text of The Wiener Holocaust Library's 2021 exhibition on death marches. WHL Collections.

The exhibition was specifically self-referential, as we wanted to engage visitors with the curatorial choices we had made. We also had a virtual (Covid friendly) ‘guest book’ where visitors could share their views, and with permission, their answers will be shared on social media to generate further discussion.

The exhibition had the main purpose of complicating notions of ‘liberation’ at the end of the war and the Holocaust, but also secondarily, to describe how evidence is gathered, repurposed over time, and further mediated in the current display. Therefore, by acknowledging our own curatorial mediation and consciously drawing attention to it in the exhibition, we tried to acknowledge that we don’t ‘own’ these stories or even have the last word on them.

Among the documents shown this exhibition are eyewitness accounts gathered from survivors of Nazi persecution by the Library in the 1950s and 1960s, which have formed one of our newest digital resources, [Testifying to the Truth](#). These comprise about 1300 written eyewitness accounts, translated into English for the first time, and fully indexed and searchable. Nearly 100

relate to the death marches, but they span a variety of themes and experiences before and during the Holocaust.

The Wiener Holocaust Library

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death marches

TESTIFYING TO THE TRUTH
EYEWITNESSES TO THE HOLOCAUST

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Burning synagogue during 'Kristallnacht'
Bamberg, November 1938

During the 1950s researchers at The Wiener Holocaust Library gathered over 1,000 accounts from eyewitnesses to Nazi persecution and genocide.

These accounts cover a wide range of subjects, with material touching on almost every aspect of the Holocaust.

The early accounts were mostly written in German, often by interviewees who spoke directly to the eyewitnesses. The process would begin with listening to an individual's story, taking notes, compiling a summary, and finally asking the interviewee to check and approve the resulting document.

The project was led by the Wiener Library's Head of Research **Eva Reichmann**. Between 1954 and 1960 she led an international search for witnesses and documents.

Testifying to the Truth, the new digital archive of Holocaust eyewitness accounts recorded by the Library in the 1950s and 1960s.

Considerations of mediation, set by the interviewers and the aims and priorities of the Wiener Holocaust Library at the time of recording, apply to these accounts just as they do with audio or filmed testimonies. They too are harrowing in their descriptions, even though they are perhaps less immediate because they are written, structured reports that were compiled after interviews, rather than actual recordings. Before publishing the accounts online, a medium which would not of course have been known to interviewees at the time, the team conducted extensive, crowd-sourced research to determine if any interviewees were still alive and to clarify any possible legal issues of copyright, intellectual property or privacy. Requests for confidentiality (privacy of the individual interviewee) have naturally been honoured, and we also have a policy to take down material published online if it is requested by a descendant or relative of the family.

Although it is often challenging to balance the concern for ethical practice with access and display, the Library has taken on board these issues within our archival, research and display practices. As our participation in this workshop showed, these are issues applicable to archives well beyond the scope of the subject matter of the Holocaust, but upon which Holocaust-era archives can provide some experience and guidance.