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# Testimonies in digital environments: comparing and (de-)contextualising interviews with Holocaust survivor Anita Lasker-Wallfisch

by Cord Pagenstecher

**Abstract:** This article discusses the role of digital technology in oral history. After describing the digital environments for large-scale interview collections created at Freie Universität Berlin, the article reflects on the impact of digital technology on recording, narrating and interpreting testimony. Then it suggests a comparative approach to recorded interviews as multimodal and multilingual historical sources. Some exemplary analyses of two interviews with Holocaust survivor Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, recorded in 1998 and 2006, demonstrate the potential of digital research in oral history archives.

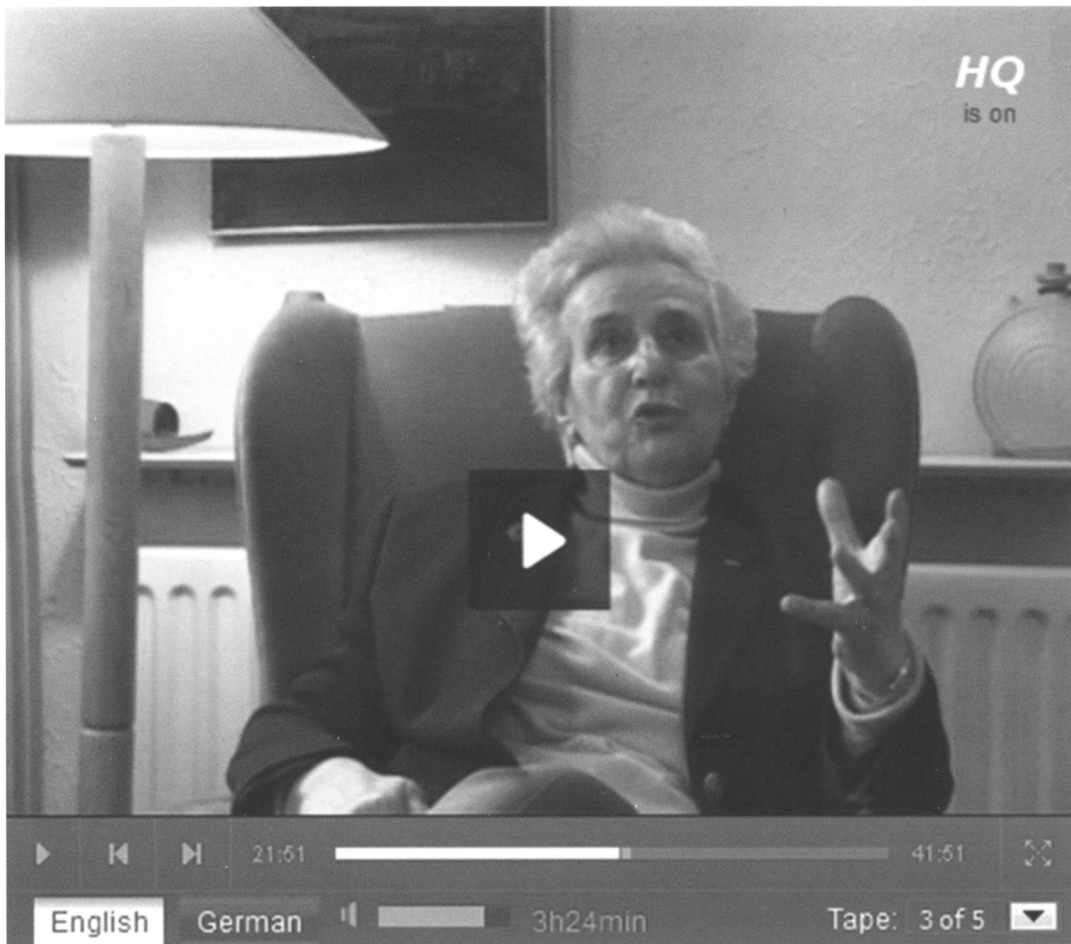
**Keywords:** interview archives; digital environments; Holocaust; retellings; multimodality; multilinguality

Many witnesses, especially survivors of the Holocaust, feel a certain obligation to narrate their personal memories, hoping that the public can draw historical and moral lessons from them. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, for example, who had been a cellist in the women's orchestra at Auschwitz and later became a co-founder of the English Chamber Orchestra, published her memoirs under the title *Inherit the Truth*.<sup>1</sup>

Polish artist and Ravensbrück survivor Helena Bohle-Szacki describes her motive for granting an interview to the online archive 'Zwangsarbeit 1939-1945' ('Forced Labor 1939-1945') as a duty towards coming generations: 'This costs me a lot of nerves and pain, but I see it as my duty. Because there are fewer and fewer survivors, and testimonies and records are needed for other people and other generations'.<sup>2</sup> While stressing the hard and painful work of giving testimony, she is also voicing a challenge for interviewers, curators, researchers and educators: how can audiovisual testimonies benefit future generations?

Since future generations will largely live and study in digital settings, we need to discuss the potential and impact of these environments on the curation and perception of testimonies. Oral history interviews are increasingly being watched via online platforms. This is especially true for well-known Holocaust survivors like Lasker-Wallfisch. A highly-visited digital environment like YouTube contains 2,000 videos tagged 'Lasker-Wallfisch', 500 of them longer than twenty minutes.<sup>3</sup> Short clips and full testimonies draw a wide audience: the German television (ZDF) documentary *Die Letzten Zeuginnen*, about the Lasker sisters, has been viewed more than 30,000 times on YouTube.<sup>4</sup>

This article, however, focuses on specific digital environments created for research and learning, and discusses their impact on understanding testimonies. One of its main topics is the problem of re-contextualising testimonies in digital representation. Two interviews with Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, recorded in 1998 and 2006, will serve as main examples in these considerations.



write annotation 

And I know that there's sometimes criticism or so that we were almost collaborators because we played music.

Gestures and facial expressions are an important part of the interview with Anita Lasker-Wallfisch in the online archive 'Forced Labor 1939-1945', za072.

After briefly presenting examples of environments created at Freie Universität Berlin, I discuss the impact of digital technology on recording, performing and interpreting testimony. I will then focus on digital research into large-scale interview collections, which supports a comparative approach to recorded interviews as multimodal and multilingual historical sources.

#### Interview archives at Freie Universität Berlin

Oral history is one of the digital humanities core activities at the Center for Digital Systems (CeDiS) of Freie Universität Berlin. Since 2006, CeDiS has been creating or hosting five major collections with testimonies focusing on the Second World War and Nazi atrocities. The Visual History Archive of the USC Shoah Foundation,<sup>5</sup> the online interview archive 'Forced Labor

1939-1945',<sup>6</sup> the British-Jewish collection 'Refugee Voices',<sup>7</sup> the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies<sup>8</sup> and the new interview archive 'Memories of the Occupation in Greece'<sup>9</sup> contain thousands of audio-visual life story interviews, amongst them two accounts from Anita Lasker-Wallfisch. To make the recordings accessible and stimulate their reception in research and education, CeDiS has created transcripts, translations, online platforms and learning applications. Additionally, its team is engaged in academic debates through publications and conferences like '*Erinnern an Zwangsarbeit*' ('Remembering Forced Labour')<sup>10</sup> and 'Preserving Survivors' Memories'.<sup>11</sup>

The oral history projects started when Freie Universität Berlin became the first site with full access to the Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive outside the

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Search the archive  
one interview selected

Legend / Filters

search term

Name of the interviewee:  
Lasker-Wallfisch, Anita

- Group
- Deployment Area
- Internment Conditions
- Language
- Place of Residence (Country)

A map shows birthplaces, deployment places, camps and factories of narrators in the online archive 'Forced Labor 1939-1945'.

United States. Whereas the Shoah Foundation had not transcribed its 53,000 interviews, CeDiS created 908 German-language (plus fifty foreign-language) transcriptions following specific guidelines. These transcripts are time-coded every minute, enabling full text search for all 958 interviews.<sup>12</sup> Among them there is the forty-page transcript of Lasker-Wallfisch's interview recorded on 8 December 1998.<sup>13</sup> The Shoah Foundation offers the German transcripts as a kind of subtitling within their online archive, but accessible only if a university has subscribed via ProQuest, the Visual History Archive's new commercial provider.<sup>14</sup>

In a second step, Freie Universität Berlin created a sophisticated online platform for a new interview collection on Nazi forced labour. The interview archive 'Forced Labor 1939-1945: Memory and History' commemorates more than twenty million people who were forced to work for the Reich. A total of 590 former forced labourers tell their life stories in detailed audio and video interviews. The collection was initiated and financed by the Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future.<sup>15</sup> The testimonies were recorded in 2005 and 2006 by thirty-two partner institutions in twenty-five countries, many of them in Ukraine, Poland and Russia.<sup>16</sup> The biographical interviews do not only relate to Nazi forced labour, they also touch upon various other historical aspects of 'the century of

camp', from *Holodomor* to *Perestroika*, from the Spanish Civil War to the Yugoslav Wars. About a third of the interviews were conducted with former prisoners of concentration camps, many of them Jews or Roma.<sup>17</sup> Amongst these, there is a three-and-a-half-hour video interview with Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, recorded on 17 March 2006.<sup>18</sup>

The interviews have been transcribed, translated into German, indexed and made available in an online archive together with accompanying photos and documents. Users are required to register before they can access the full interviews. Since 2009, over 9,000 archive users – students, researchers, teachers and other interested persons – have been granted access to the collection.

Faceted search options allow for filtering the interviews for victims' groups, areas of deployment, places, camps and companies or interview language. Using a full text search, the user can jump directly to interview sequences concerning a specific topic. Tables of contents and brief biographies offer an orientation into the occasionally complex narrative structure and help to clarify the biographical context.

A map visualises birthplaces and deployment locations of the narrators, and demonstrates the European dimensions of Nazi forced labour and of post-war migration patterns as well. Using satellite imagery provided by Google Maps, the user can move from a geographical

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Search the archive  
one interview selected

**Lasker-Wallfisch, Anita** female, born in 1925 ☆ mark interview

Interview Forced Labor Data

Duration of Interview  
Video 3h24min  
Date of Interview  
17.03.2006  
Interviewer  
Thonfeld, Christoph  
Transcriber  
Not Specified  
Language  
English, with German translation  
Translator  
Pfnannmöller, Katrin  
Researcher  
Bauer, Christiane  
Proofreader  
Pfnannmöller, Katrin  
Segmentator  
Hahn, Philipp  
Subset  
Great Britain – FernUni Hagen  
Archive ID  
za072

Search in 'Anita Lasker-Wallfisch'  
orchestr\*

Table of Contents

Search Results eng deu

...was very fortuitous, because she said, "That's fantastic, there's an orchestra here, wait a minute." So she left me there, ...

In "Encounter with Alma Rosá":  
[11:00:17:55]  
...Rosá who has been the leader of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra for years, had a very famous quartet.

In "Accommodation and Reception in the Camp Orchestra":  
[11:00:19:02]  
So I was in quarantine for a bit, I can't remember how long, which was absolutely unbelievable, terrible, and then somebody came to the block, "Where is the cellist?"  
[11:00:19:40]  
So I became a member of this orchestra, which, I will say, really saved my life. I mean, ...  
[11:00:20:00]  
...also knew exactly that, as long as they want an orchestra, they won't stick us in the gas chamber, but it ...

write annotation

English German 3h24min Tape: 1 of 5

So I became a member of this orchestra, which, I will say, really saved my life. I mean, we knew all the while we were sitting, our block was practically opposite the crematorium.

• Biography (pdf) [deu] [eng]  
• Transcript (pdf) [deu] [eng]

Metadata, subtitles, full-text search, table of contents and additional documents support the analysis of Anita Lasker-Wallfisch's interview of 2006 in the online archive 'Forced Labor 1939-1945', za072.

macro level to a topographical micro level by zooming in on barracks and factories, whether preserved or no longer extant. A 2016 satellite image shows Anita Lasker-Wallfisch's forced labour factory still standing on the outskirts of Wrocław and her music block No 12 near the Birkenau ramp, as well as the empty green meadows covering Bergen-Belsen's former camp area today. Through this form of data visualisation, digital mapping contextualises the survivors' testimonies within current local cultures of memory, or forgotten memory. In contrast to other oral history collections, where much research still relies on written transcriptions, the new digital environments at CeDiS come with a time-coded alignment of transcriptions, media files and metadata, and allow for thematically-focused searches and annotations throughout the video recordings.

The archives were, however, mainly aimed at historians, educators and the general public, supporting a qualitative and hermeneutic study of individual testimonies. Therefore, no tools for corpus-linguistic analyses or data visualisation had been integrated. In the future, however, such tools can provide new interdisciplinary research perspectives for oral historians and their collections.<sup>19</sup> Some potentials and risks of applying digital and data-driven methods to narrative biographical interviews will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

To make the recordings accessible for school teaching, CeDiS has created interview-based online learning environments for fourteen to eighteen-year-old students in different languages. Apart from the German platforms 'Zwangsarbeit 1939-1945' and 'Zeugen der

*Shoah*', CeDiS has supported learning applications with selected interview films and contextualising material for Czech, Russian, Polish and Dutch schools and memorials.<sup>20</sup> In the German platform, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch is one of the witnesses narrating her experiences to students in a thirty-minute biographical short film. Furthermore, she is a major protagonist of a background film on the topic of oral history as a historical source and method.

These educational environments aim to support a critical analysis of oral history, including questions regarding the interview setting, the biographical narration and differing patterns of memory. Working through competence-oriented and interview-based tasks, the students learn that history – whether in interviews or textbooks – is always an interpretive construction of the past.

### Studying different retellings

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch was chosen for this article as an example because she gave many different interviews throughout the decades, from the first BBC interview recorded by Patrick Gordon Walker in liberated Bergen-Belsen in April 1945<sup>21</sup> to a three-dimensional holographic interview at the University of Southern California in September 2015.<sup>22</sup> Repeated interviews or retellings by the same narrator allow for a comparative study of the impact of technology on recording, performing and perceiving testimony, since the wide array of differences regarding language, mediativity, interviewing method and recording context can be

compared more easily when the narrators and biographies are at least the same. Such a comparison can also highlight the potential of digital research methods for analysing oral history interviews.

The existence of multiple interviews with the same witness has recently become a research topic, and various studies have underlined a great resilience in Holocaust retellings.<sup>25</sup> While the core stories remain the same in repeated testimonies, they are often framed and narrated in different ways. In their reflections about repeated interviews with Holocaust survivors, Dori Laub and Johanna Bodenstab<sup>24</sup> pointed to three changing contexts. A comparison of interviews conducted by Laub for Yale University's Fortunoff Archive in the 1980s with those made in 2005 for the 'Forced Labor 1939-1945' collection reveals (1) the changing context of a different memory discourse in society; (2) the narrators' ageing process, which enlarges their narrative experiences; and (3) the varying methods and techniques of the interviewer.

In Lasker-Wallfisch's interviews, all three factors – society, narrator and interviewer – have changed dramatically over the decades.<sup>25</sup> But we also need to add another dimension: the mediality of the testimony. Technology obviously matters in various perspectives: it affects the recording, giving and perceiving of testimony.

### Technology in recording, narration and perception

The last seventy years were marked by a profound development in recording technology: from the wire recorder used by psychologist David Boder<sup>26</sup> in 1946 – and, one might assume, also by Patrick Gordon Walker in his BBC van in Belsen in the 1940s – to tape recordings in the oral history projects of the 1970s, to celluloid film in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, to video technology (analogue VHS in earlier projects, digital HD in recent projects), finally to the three-dimensional holograms created by USC Shoah Foundation since 2015.

The changing efforts in state-of-the-art recording technology have implications for interview projects in their overall setting. With a cheap tape recorder, oral historians of the 1970s ventured to collect the voices of ordinary people, the neglected stories of the working class and of women or migrants, in order to write a more democratic and inclusive history. Earlier, expensive technology limited the number of interviewees which led to a preference for retelling the life stories of established narrators over the life stories of lesser-known narrators.

Cheap recording material can make it easier to allow the narrator to talk with few time limitations in the way of a biographical-narrative interview,<sup>27</sup> whereas structured interviews, rendering supposedly clear information, might be preferred when technology is expensive. Recent three-dimensional interviews conducted at the USC Shoah Foundation aim at projecting a holographic witness into the classroom or museum hall, and use



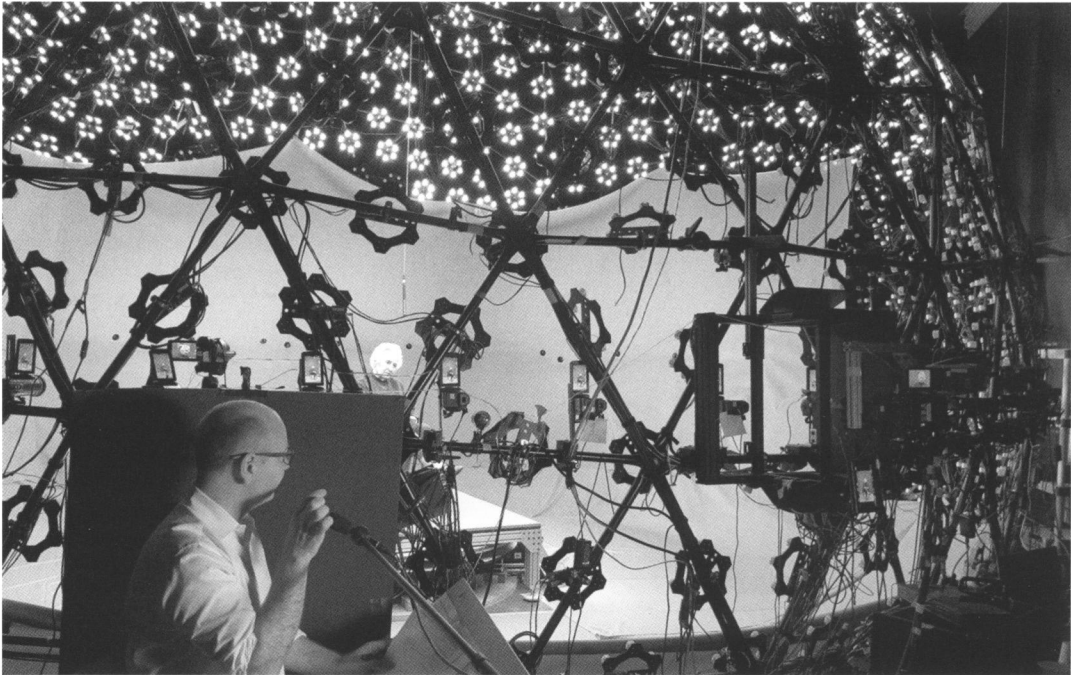
Anita Lasker-Wallfisch's interview in the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, 1998.

speech recognition software to enable a 'dialogue' between the students or visitors and the survivor's hologram. For Shoah Foundation director Stephen Smith, this technology is a turning point away from the narrative character of testimonies: 'Oral history just changed irreversibly [...] into conversational question-and-answer testimony'.<sup>28</sup>

Technology also has an effect on the atmosphere of an interview. With a small tape recorder on the table, the narrator can build up an intimate relationship with the interviewer, discussing and co-constructing the testimony together, and the subjects might even forget that they are being recorded. But the performing element of giving testimony is much more present in a hologram interview, such as when Lasker-Wallfisch was 'sitting on USC Institute for Creative Technologies' cutting-edge 3D capture stage surrounded by high-definition cameras and LED lights' for six hours over four days.<sup>29</sup> This is also true, however, for every video recording: the subjects' knowing that not only will their story be heard, but that every wrinkle, tear or gesture will be visible for the audience; all of this influences their way of telling. While transcriptions of audio recordings can be polished, the visual image remains thus, and many narrators do care about this.

The narrator might feel this performative dimension to be stressful and intimidating, or – and this seems to be the case with Lasker-Wallfisch – as acknowledging and confirming one's self-determination and importance. In her 1992 talks with Gabriele Knapp, she had initially rejected being recorded ('I hate tape recorders'), then heavily corrected the ('appallingly') verbatim transcriptions.<sup>30</sup> She has obviously opened up to technology over the years, until the point that she finally accepted creating a three-dimensional avatar of herself in the 2015 holographic recordings.

Apart from recording, technology also changes the perception of the setting for oral history interviews. In the twenty-first century, enhanced storage and software capacities allowed for the creation of digital environ-



Anita Lasker-Wallfisch's holographic interview for the USC Shoah Foundation's 'New Dimensions in Testimony' project, 2015.

ments for large interview collections. The digital revolution is changing the curation and presentation of interviews much more than just the way they are recorded; Steven High enthusiastically pointed to the fact that 'the most exciting possibilities are emerging after the interview'.<sup>31</sup> Alistair Thomson's judgement is more cautious: 'Digital tools are transforming access to and use of oral history [...] while also generating methodological challenges and stretching old ethical dilemmas in new directions'.<sup>32</sup> The digital presentation of interviews obviously influences how we perceive them. With reference to Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay on the *aura* of art in modern times,<sup>33</sup> Andree Michaelis has written about the 'testimony in the age of mechanical reproduction'.<sup>34</sup> So what happens to the perception of testimony and its aura in the digital age?

First of all, digital archives help researchers to study interviews, and cases of retellings in particular, because they enable them to find these retold interviews in the first place. This retrieval still remains difficult, however, since different collections are not linked through a single meta-catalogue. Especially in Germany, where interview collections, often run by under-funded non-governmental initiatives, have very different cataloguing systems and metadata schemas; many interviews are not even digitised. Thus, we do not really know how many testimonies Lasker-Wallfisch has given. She herself probably does not know either.

### Digital de-contextualisation

The digitised perception of historical sources usually implies a higher degree of abstraction on an intellectual

and sensual level because the material and embodied dimensions of the past are lost. When researchers watch Lasker-Wallfisch's recording on the screen, instead of talking to her in person, they obviously miss a lot of context: what was talked about before the recording, what the apartment looked like, etc. While interview protocols and set photos are available for many interviews, at least in 'Forced Labor 1939-1945', every secondary analysis will have to cope with a loss of contextual knowledge. Further, digital testimony does not usually convey the aura of a live encounter with a survivor. On the relational or emotional level, researchers will find themselves in a much more distanced, neutral state of mind, which might limit – or enhance – their analytical interpretations of the testimony.

The digital de-contextualisation gets more profound when researchers use a digital environment to search interview segments about a specific topic instead of listening to complete testimonies. With a full text search for 'orchest\*', the researcher can jump directly to thirty-five segments of Lasker-Wallfisch's interview in the 'Forced Labor 1939-1945' archive. They can find and copy useful quotations like: 'So I became a member of this orchestra, which, I will say, really saved my life'.<sup>35</sup> But they will not understand the meaning correctly without knowing the context of the entire testimony. The table of contents provided by the archive platform can help to contextualise a quote within the interview, but cannot act as a substitute for a complete viewing. It is better utilised during a second round of viewing as a tool for re-finding important segments, which also

can be saved and tagged in a user's area of the online platform.

The full-text search feature does help external contextualisation, however. When we do the same search for 'orchest\*' for all testimonies from concentration camp prisoners in the collection, we find segments from thirty-nine interviews, amongst them that of Antonina T, a Polish survivor, who recalls the humiliation she felt when hearing the orchestra: 'It was terribly sad for us. We cried [...]. The orchestra was playing the march right into your stomach. Yes. It was a mockery'.<sup>36</sup> Another witness, Zofia Ł, remained traumatised afterwards: 'Whenever an orchestra, a wind orchestra was playing, I used to cry. Because the memories were coming back'.<sup>37</sup>

Of course, we can find many more and varied voices quoted in publications about the Auschwitz orchestra.<sup>38</sup> This issue has been raised here to demonstrate the comparative potential of digital interview environments. At the same time, digital retrieval cannot be a substitute for listening to the entire testimonies of Antonina T or Zofia Ł. When we compare the segments found through digital search options based on time-coded indexing or transcriptions, we are in fact correlating extracted language data and not necessarily understanding the survivors' memories. This de-contextualisation remains inevitably linked with digital research procedures. Digital environments do not ease the 'tension between biography and cross-analysis', which Paul Thompson has evaluated as both a challenge and strength of oral history.<sup>39</sup>

### Comparing retellings in 1998 and 2006

In both of her interviews in 1998 and 2006, Lasker-Wallfisch talks briefly about criticism from other survivors. In 1998, she recalls that 'opinions are varied. I have never really come across any abuse, but obviously we were envied, [...] we were the ladies. We were better-dressed, you know, we were the showpiece'. These varied opinions are mentioned in a cautious way, with some hesitations and pauses in their formulation.<sup>40</sup>

In 2006, however, Lasker-Wallfisch says more precisely: 'And I know that there's sometimes criticism or so that we were almost collaborators because we played music'. Apart from her much clearer claim of epistemic authority ('I know'), you can see a small thematic change here: in 1998 she talks about envy, in 2006 she discusses alleged collaboration.<sup>41</sup> This change in argumentation could be interpreted as a reaction to the public debate about the women's orchestra in Auschwitz, as an example of the change in the societal discourse. But Lasker-Wallfisch took part in this debate long before her 1998 interview.<sup>42</sup> Thus, her changed argument might rather be a reaction towards the interviewer and his question if the orchestra could be evaluated as 'slave-labour'. The second narration definitely demonstrates an intensified reflectivity and a grown self-confidence as survivor, narrator and expert.

This increased narrative experience becomes very clear when comparing the language in the 1998 and

2006 interviews. Lasker-Wallfisch's performative effort became more elaborate and successful in her later narration when she directly quoted other people more often. In 1998, she described her introduction to the orchestra at Birkenau using indirect speech: 'So, she asked me to play something'. In 2006, however, she used a more direct reference: 'And she gave me a cello and said: "Play something"'.<sup>43</sup>

This example is corroborated through some quantitative comparisons: in 1998, there are about 100 instances of direct speech, in 2006 about 320 instances. The transcript of the later interview, which is just over fifty per cent longer, contains over 300 per cent more quotation marks. This seems to be a general tendency in narrating: when studying retellings in other contexts, linguists find a move towards performativity, marked by an increase in direct speech.<sup>44</sup> More experienced narrators give their testimony with more performative elements and an enhanced narrative authority. Like other Holocaust survivors, Lasker-Wallfisch has obviously become a 'professional' witness over the years. And there is nothing wrong with that, even though some listeners are craving to hear the purportedly 'authentic' first and spontaneous narration of a testimony.

Lasker-Wallfisch's more elaborate narration in 2006 was also enabled by a different method of interviewing. A quantitative comparison of the two transcripts demonstrates a different interaction between narrator and interviewer. Both interviewers – Scottish BBC journalist Joanna Buchan in 1998 and German historian Christoph Thonfeld in 2006 – intervened roughly once per minute throughout the interview, an average amount.<sup>45</sup> But half of Thonfeld's interventions were just supporting incentives to continue, whereas Buchan asked many 'where, when and how' questions, sometimes interrupting Lasker-Wallfisch's narrative flow.<sup>46</sup>

These results point to the different professional backgrounds of the various interviewers, but also to different methodical guidelines in the interview projects.<sup>47</sup> Digital interview collections can support such a comparative analysis of transcripts on a larger scale, helping us to better understand the working alliance between narrator and interviewer, which lies at the heart of each oral history interview.<sup>48</sup> Many oral historians have reflected intensely on the need for and the difficulties of maintaining a 'shared authority' in creating the interview. While valuing this self-reflexivity of the interviewer-historians highly, digital archives and corpus-linguistic methods could support a critical analysis of the actual communication process during the interview by other researchers.

### Assessing multimodality and multilinguality

While de-contextualisation is inherent in digital research, digital environments for oral history allow for working much closer to the audiovisual historical source. Before the digital age, it was quite complicated to spool to a relevant section of the audio tape. Most



oral historians worked with a textual representation in the form of full verbatim or lightly edited transcripts. While the transcript remains 'the most efficient human interface for long-form oral history interviews',<sup>48</sup> this analysis of a written approximation of – or rather interpretation of – the spoken word neglects the non-verbal dimensions of the testimonies: pronunciation, hesitation, silence, gesture and facial expression. Detailed transcriptions of these multimodal dimensions coded through a certain number of dots or slashes or commented in brackets are helpful, but can render the text almost illegible and still fail to convey the real listening experience.

Digital technology now offers the possibility of studying the audiovisual sources themselves, including the multiple modalities captured in the video images and the audio track. Digitised audio collections help us to 'consider how the sound of the words might be part of their meaning'.<sup>49</sup> Video recordings add more possible layers of analysis.<sup>50</sup> Of course, earlier studies have already done such analyses, but are usually limited to a few of the scholar's own interviews, namely from Yale's Fortunoff archive.<sup>51</sup> Digital collections make it much easier to study non-verbal communication on a larger scale, although video annotation software that enables automatic gesture recognition is still not working well enough for any serious research.

The importance of non-verbal interaction between the narrator and the interviewer can be observed in Lasker-Wallfisch's discussion of the collaboration accusations against her and the Auschwitz orchestra members: she visually forges an argumentative alliance with the interviewer by intensely looking at him when rhetorically asking him about the musician-prisoners' pseudo-alternative between playing and dying: 'What are you going to do?'<sup>52</sup> Applying all of the communicative resources of voice, face and hands, she mocks these critics: 'What would have happened if we said, "No, we're not playing, we go on strike". Well, you don't have to guess what would have happened. [Laughs]'. Such sarcastic comments – 'we were the slaves that made the noise' – are abundant in Lasker-Wallfisch's testimony; they help her to speak about the unspeakable, but also enhance her communicative authority over an interviewer who could never talk about Auschwitz in this laconic way.

A recurrent non-verbal element in Lasker-Wallfisch's interviews is her cigarette. It can be linked to her performativity, such as when, in 2006, she said to the interviewer: 'Okay, a lot of people ask me to smoke... because it sort of makes a good picture'.<sup>53</sup> There might be more biographical relevance to it, however, since – in another interview – she remembers the symbolic importance of smoking a cigarette in Auschwitz as a manifestation of normality and survival.<sup>54</sup>

Due to deportation and forced migration experiences, many testimonies contain language mixes or are almost bilingual documents. Comparing Lasker-Wallfisch's testimonies, we can study deliberate or unwilling language changes and ask ourselves which topics or

perspectives are worded in English, which in German. In a 1992 German-language interview, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch switched to English in emotionally moving segments.<sup>55</sup> In her 1998 VHA interview, she uses only a handful of German words, apparently taken over from the SS, such as *Zählappell* or *Notenschreiberinnen*. In all survivors' testimonies, the German perpetrators' camp language has entered the victims' memories, narrated in a specific vocabulary.

In Lasker-Wallfisch's interview from 2006 for 'Forced Labor 1939-1945', however, her native German language was continuously surfacing. She mainly used German words for specific topics over the pre-war era (such as *Frontkämpfer* or *Kultur*) and the post-war period (such as *Gedenkstätte* or *Neonazis*). The main reason for this could be the fact that the interviewer was German: she could be sure that Thonfeld would understand every German word, even their fine-grained nuances. In comparing multiple accounts, it has been noted that bilingual narrators deliberately apply specific wordings in each language.<sup>56</sup> But there might be other reasons, too. In the seven-year period between the two interviews, Lasker-Wallfisch cautiously reopened herself towards the country of her birth and her persecution, visiting Bergen-Belsen and other places several times.

In general, a linguistic approach, supported by digital tools, can help the historian to listen more closely to the details of the narration, focusing on specific words rather than on general content. It might be interesting to see, for example, in which contexts Lasker-Wallfisch – and other survivors – talk about themselves as individuals, using the singular 'I', or as members of a group, using the plural 'we'. For such future research projects, an increased co-operation between oral historians and corpus and interactional linguists could be very productive.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has endeavoured to assess the impact of digital technology on recording, giving and analysing testimonies. It has shown how digital tools in large-scale interview collections can support historians in applying their established methods of source criticism to oral history interviews in a more detailed and adequate way than before. Some tentative findings, based on two interviews with Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, demonstrate the potential of a comparative approach to recorded interviews as multimodal and multilingual historical sources.

Oral history has thus far worked mostly with small interview samples, often testing specific hypotheses and finding them confirmed in these samples. The digital curation of interview archives broadens the range of available data, because it allows for a secondary analysis of existing sources. This is especially important for memorialising historical events like the Holocaust, which gradually disappear from communicative memory as fewer and fewer witnesses remain to be interviewed.

Digital oral history archives are accessible to numerous researchers, who can build on each others' findings, and verify or modify them. Apart from this interdisciplinary control effect, they could support a data-driven approach to interviews, which could increase the possibility of detecting new and unexpected patterns. To understand literature, Franco Moretti has argued, we should stop reading books and apply computer-aided *distant reading* methods instead.<sup>59</sup> But does that work

for testimonies, too? Can we really understand human memory by aggregating and analysing massive amounts of audiovisual narrative data? We should use digital technologies to test the potential of such *distant watching*, and then combine it with careful *close watching* to further enhance our understanding of survivors' testimonies. Different ethical dimensions and problems of testimonies in digital environments will also need to be specifically addressed.

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- 39.** Thompson and Borna, 2017, p 363.
- 40.** Interview with Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, interview 48608, segment 74.
- 41.** Interview with Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, 'Forced Labor 1939-1945', interview za072, tape 3, 00:21:27.
- 42.** In 1992, she had already written an (unpublished) critical analysis of Fania Fénelon's book on the orchestra which was published in 1976 and filmed in 1980. Knapp, 1996, p 198 onwards.
- 43.** See several articles in Schumann, Gülich, Lucius-Hoene and Pfänder, 2015. For the analysis of another sequence of Lasker-Wallfisch's interviews, see Pagenstecher and Pfänder, 2017.
- 44.** In 1998, Buchan intervened 142 times in the two-hour interview or 1.14 times per minute. In 2006, Thonfeld intervened 246 times in the 3.5-hour interview or 1.21 times per minute. This rate roughly corresponds to the 0.9 interventions per minute in four other Shoah Foundation interviews analysed by Michaelis, 2013, p 288. Other comparative data are missing.
- 45.** Only in thirteen of Buchan's interventions could Lasker-Wallfisch take over again within no more than five words. Buchan's factual questions (thirty-one 'what', seventeen 'how', thirteen 'where') probably corresponded to the Shoah Foundation's VHA question list (compare Michaelis 2013, p 233).
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- 54.** Compare Knapp, 1996, p 193.
- 55.** Knapp, 1996, p 188.
- 56.** See the example analysed by Katarina Bader, 2015, p 210, footnote 8.
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