

Spatial Experiences of the Holocaust: Visualizing Testimonies of Ghettoization

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The interdisciplinary Holocaust Ghettos Project team is working to identify spatial experience and places embedded in testimony collections. A corpus of 1,800 testimonies, culled from the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive and the USHMM Oral History collections, is the base for an effort to jointly analyze and visualize such testimonies with an historical GIS of Nazi-era ghettos in Eastern Europe, in order to reach a more grounded understanding of ghettoization as a process involving both perpetrators and victims.

Studies based on oral histories have usually analyzed small numbers of testimonies in order to understand the perspectives and experiences of individuals or small groups. We approach this body of sources with two different goals. One is to compare close reading of individual testimonies to what we can learn through digital, more distant reading of hundreds of testimonies. For example, do men and women speak of their Holocaust experiences in significantly different ways? Our other goal is to develop new ways to identify and study the many kinds of places where important events occurred in victims' experiences, whether those places are recognizable (Vienna, Lublin, Buchenwald) or are unnamed, unmappable places such as a room, the alley, or a hill by the river. This paper will briefly explain the methods of corpus analysis and data visualization we have developed. With examples drawn from transcripts of interviews with survivors from across Europe, we will discuss the potential and value of, for instance, spatial dictionaries and topological maps of spatial experience, or the possibility of a corporeal topography of ghettoization. In particular, we will broach questions such as, what can we learn through distant reading that close interpretation does not reveal? Which ethical and empirical concerns emerge when treating survivor interviews as evidence for multi-scalar analysis?