

The Shoah Foundation:
Documenting Tragedy and Inspiring Education

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Documenting the terrors, struggles and human rights violations of the Holocaust has been the main goal of the Shoah Foundation. Established in 1994 by well known filmmaker, Steven Spielberg, over 52,000 interviews were conducted with survivors and other witnesses of the Holocaust. The interviews, which came from 56 countries, covered a broad range of survivors, including Jewish survivors, political prisoners, homosexual survivors, and rescuers. With over 114,000 hours of testimony, the foundation is dedicated to preserving the stories and experiences of those who witnessed the Holocaust, to ensure all future generations are well educated in the genocide.

After World War II, an era of Holocaust denial began in countries around the world. United States government officials, popular publications, and outspoken public figures began falsely claiming the Holocaust was a hoax. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) explains that there were, and are, many ways Holocaust denial can occur, such as claiming that “The murder of approximately six million Jews during World War II never occurred”, “that the Nazis had no official policy or intention to exterminate the Jews,” and “that the poison gas chambers in Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp never existed.” In addition, the USHMM states that, “Common distortions include assertions that the figure of six million Jewish deaths is an exaggeration and that the diary of Anne Frank is a forgery.” With the rise in Holocaust denial, it became essential to document testimonials of people who had witnessed the Holocaust on a first hand bases. While the documentation of Holocaust survivors was occurring during the 1980s and 1990s, the first organization to do so with a significant amount of funding, and on such a large scale, was the Shoah Foundation.

In 1994, the Shoah Foundation was founded at The Institute for Visual History and Education at the University of Southern California. The original goal of the founder, Steven Spielberg was to collect at least 50,000 interviews with Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. Spielberg, who had recently concluded filming for the soon to be classic, Schindler’s List, created the foundation after the

extensive research he had done for his film. It was important to Spielberg to include not just Jewish survivors of death camps, but to also include political prisoners, homosexual survivors, and rescuers. On April 18, 1994, the first interview for the foundation was recorded with Holocaust survivor Isabella Goldstein. This interview would mark the beginning of the extensive documentation the organization would initiate.

Over the next decade and a half, the organization would go on to collect over 52,000 interviews with individuals who had witnessed the Holocaust. Today, the Shoah Foundation has expanded its efforts to document more than the stories of Holocaust survivors, and is actively seeking out interviews with survivors of the Rwandan Genocide, the Nanjing Massacre, the Armenian Genocide, the Guatemalan Genocide and the Cambodian Genocide. Documenting the stories of individuals who have experienced the tragedy and horror of genocides is important for several reasons. The first being that, with living in a world where so many governments and outspoken individuals deny genocide, it is important to educate the public on what has truly happened. It is essential to teach the younger generations of the genocides to help ensure a tragedy such as the Holocaust or any genocide, does not happen again.

Bibliography:

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