



# The Visual History Archive (VHA) Access Through Indexing

Donna D. Casey, Archivist,  
USC Shoah Foundation Institute  
University of Southern California  
Los Angeles, CA 90089-2812



# USC Shoah Foundation Collection

- Video-taped testimonies from survivors and other witnesses of the Holocaust of WWII.
- Nearly **52,000 testimonies** taken in:
  - **32 languages**
  - **56 countries**
- Currently working to include additional genocide experiences collected by the Foundation and like minded organizations:
  - Rwandan Tutsi Genocide testimonies
  - Armenian Genocide testimonies
  - Additional Holocaust testimonies

# Experience Group Classification

- **Holocaust**
  - Jewish Survivors
  - Homosexual Survivors
  - Political Prisoners
  - Sinti and Roma Survivors
  - War Crimes Trials Participants
  - Jehovah's Witness Survivors
  - Liberators and Liberation Witnesses
  - Rescuers and Aid Providers
  - Survivors of Eugenics Policies
- **Rwandan Tutsi Genocide**
  - Tutsi Survivors
  - Aid Givers
- **Armenian Genocide**
  - Armenian Survivors

# Indexing Needs

- **Thesaurus Manager**
  - For the creation and management of indexing terms in a hierarchical structure
- **Biographical Indexing Application**
  - For data entry from the Pre-Interview Questionnaire and from the video itself
- **Video Indexing Application**
  - For dividing the video into 1 minute segments and attaching indexing terms from the thesaurus to those segments
- **Video**
  - Indexing copy

# Thesaurus (Controlled Vocabulary)

- **Indexing Term Creation Process**
  - Proposed by indexers as new content is encountered (content driven)
  - Reviewed by indexing supervisors
  - Researched by staff who find sources that support the creation of the term and write the definitions.
- **Metadata for Indexing Terms**
  - Label
  - Definition
  - Geographic Coordinates (for geographic terms only)
  - Scope Note
  - References sources used for validation
  - Synonyms
  - Relationship to parent term(s), sibling terms, and child terms
  - Attachments to testimonies

# Thesaurus Creation Challenges

- **Lack of access to good reference sources**
  - Under documented:
    - genocide experiences
    - ethnic groups
  - Wartime and inter-war Geographic materials:
    - gazetteers
    - atlases
    - maps
    - name change reference works
- **Geographic terms are difficult to research because:**
  - many communities no longer exists
  - borders fluctuate during war and genocide events
  - place names change when borders and languages change
  - many place names are the same or similar to others

# Challenges Inherent in the Testimony

- **Languages used:**
  - Language(s) spoken were chosen by the Interviewee
  - Multiple languages spoken in a single testimony
  - Multiple languages used in one word
  - Mispronunciation of non-native language terms
- **Use and miss-use of:**
  - antonyms
  - synonyms
  - homonyms
  - abbreviations
  - acronyms
  - slang
  - nick names
- **Dates:**
  - Unknown
  - Accurate/specific
  - Approximate
  - Span dates
  - Falsified
  - Multiple for a single event (birthdates)
  - Refused (interviewee is reluctant to give a known date)
- **Health and age of interviewees:**
  - Speech problems (i.e. stroke victims)
  - Hearing problems (i.e. deaf interviewees)
  - Memory issues

# Solutions

- **Guidelines** for indexing and thesaurus development
- **Appropriate staff:**
  - fluent in the language(s) spoken in the testimonies
  - fluent in English (the language of the Thesaurus)
  - knowledge of the history
  - knowledge of types of experience
- **Intensive training**
- **Quality Assurance Reviews**
- **Attention to detail and nuance**
- **Cooperative work culture**
- **Active pursuit of reference materials**





# User Applications

## – VHA

- Available at 40 access sites round the world
- Used by scholars and the general public
- Full Collection or partial collection depending upon the site

## – VHA Online

- Available online at <http://vhaonline.usc.edu/>
- Used by scholars and the general public
- Full set of data is searchable but only 1,120 videos are available at this time

## – IWitness

- Available online
- Developed in concert with secondary school teachers
- Used to develop lesson plans for secondary school students
- 1,020 testimonies available at this time