

Arts & Entertainment

Talking history: Survivors speak for the camera

If you ever encounter some heartless, brainless galoot trying to pass off some of that Holocaust-was-a-lie propaganda, politely tell them about the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation. Shoah is a Hebrew word for the Holocaust.



Mark
Hinson

Since 1994, the Survivors of Shoah has taped more than 6,000, one-on-one, 2-hour interviews with people who lived to tell what happened behind the walls of concentration camps, in the ghettos or in the secret hiding places of Hitler's hell-on-Earth.

Over the next three years, the Shoah project hopes to tape tens of thousands of such interviews all across the world. Each one will be tagged, cataloged and stored in an interactive archive that can be accessed through a museum or major university.

Let's see the propagandists try to argue with that mountain of historical proof.

Looking at a variety of stories

"Our definition of survivor is very broad and not exclusively for concentration-camp survivors," Shoah production director Michael Engel said from his office in Los Angeles.

"We're looking for people who were in labor camps, or resistance movements, or who were one step ahead of the Nazis or who were forced to flee. . . . We're interested in many stories."

Recent interviews gathered by the Shoah dragnet include a Slovakian woman who arrived on the first transport to Birkenau in 1942 and later worked as a nurse in Mengele's hospital.

In the Netherlands, Shoah made contact with an elderly survivor who taught English to Anne Frank's mother.

The survivors are usually filmed in their homes, or another comfortable environment, and questioned on camera by specially trained volunteers.

"Our interviewers come from all walks of life — historians, psychologists, teachers, journalists, we get a lot of journalists," Engel said. "But they do come from all over."

During the actual filming on the set, the stories get tough and emotional a lot of times, so it takes mental preparation by both parties.

"The first few histories you are exposed to may emotionally affect you," is one piece of advice passed along in Shoah literature to volunteers. "But be aware, most people doing this type of work have developed workable ways of separating themselves from the stories they are taping. This is not a matter of insensitivity but a necessity that will prevent burnout."

Recently, a call for volunteer interviewers in Boca Raton attracted 200 people.

Locally, artist and filmmaker Tyler Turkel ("The Last Days of Eddie Marsicano") has volunteered his services as a videographer.

Tallahassee sound engineer Pete Winter and producer Glen Sharron of Mediaworks studio have also signed on to help in any way.

"I'm just trying to help discover survivors or let other people know about it so they can contact survivors," Turkel said. "The documentation is the important thing."

"We hope to be doing 50 to 60 interviews per week (in the Southeast) in a few weeks," Engel said.

As always, it's a race against time because most of the world's estimated 325,000 survivors are in their 70s or 80s. Time to talk is limited.

Money is welcome, too

The Survivors of Shoah got a big initial push from entertainment giant Steven Spielberg, who won the Oscar for directing of "Schindler's List." It has also drawn major support from big-time corporations such as Sony and the David Geffen Foundation.

However, the non-profit project still needs another \$60 million, not to mention volunteers and more help locating survivors willing to talk.

The phone number for Shoah is: (800) 661-2092.

Here's where to write:

Survivors of Shoah; P.O. Box 3168; Los Angeles, CA 90078-3168.