# Blogging As a Research Method? The EHRI Document Blog

*by Michal Frankl*

## Abstract

*In January 2016, the EHRI project launched a Document Blog, an experimental space for project partners, historians and archivists to discuss and test new digital approaches to Holocaust documentation. As a work in progress, the blog allows not only to develop new methods and share ideas, but also to assess the needs and issues of at least a part of digitally engaged Holocaust scholars and archivists. Building on this experience, the proposed article will, apart from providing general information about the Document Blog and the technology used, discuss the platform from two perspectives.*



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## Introduction

In his *Sources of Holocaust Research*, Raul Hilberg revisited the subject of his magisterial *The Destruction of European Jews*, observing his own research from a different perspective. Having sifted through an immense amount of original documentation on the persecution and murder of German and European Jews, he only later "stopped to ask myself: what is the nature of my sources? […] They have their own history and qualities, which are different from the actions they depict and which require a separate approach."[1] Yet, what seemed like a self-evident and banal scientific enterprise turned out to be as rewarding as it was difficult for the respected historian: "At the halfway mark of my labor I recognized that what I considered an afterthought turned out to be a challenge instead."[2] In his retrospective work, Hilberg developed an overview of the typology of Holocaust sources, based on their material characteristics, as well as origin and function, and explored their specific styles and content.

These and similar questions also informed the creation of the Document Blog of the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI), the subject of this article.[3] Even more than 70 years after the end of World War II, the identification of the sources of Holocaust research, and questions of physical or virtual access, interpretation, and dissemination continue to be the subject of a vivid conversation. Over the last several decades, numerous scholarly publications and projects, in fact, have contributed to the exploration of new perspectives and have included a much broader set of sources. EHRI and, consequently, its Document Blog reflect on the significance and specifics of Holocaust documentation and research.[4] The EHRI Portal[5] and other services aim to make it easier for researchers to identify collections, understand their research potential, and expand the scope of the sources of Holocaust research.

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[1] Raul Hilberg, *Sources of Holocaust Research. An Analysis*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 7–8.
[2] *Ibid.*, 8.
[3] For an overview of the aims and activities of the project, see Tobias Blanke et al., "The European Holocaust Research Infrastructure Portal," in *Journal on Computing and Cultural Heritage 10/1* (2017), https://doi.org/10.1145/3004457.
[4] The widening of the sources of Holocaust research is well illustrated in the edition *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933-1945*, (R. Oldenbourg: Munich, 2008), http://www.edition-judenverfolgung.de/.
[5] https://portal.ehri-project.eu/.

The EHRI Document Blog[6] is an open, experimental space that tackles questions related to Holocaust documentation, sources, and digital methodology. While allowing discussions on any issues and questions related to Holocaust documentation, the platform is particularly informed by the provenance and history of the Holocaust-related collections and sources, especially considering their destruction during World War II and the often circuitous path of the surviving materials. Like the EHRI project as a whole, the Document Blog discusses the effects of the fragmentation of the archival documentation on the Holocaust and its dispersal around the world. It supports new interpretations of Holocaust sources and highlights novel approaches to known as well as recently discovered documents, while taking into account the international nature of Holocaust research and the archives in which it can be conducted.

Moreover, Holocaust archives, memory, and research institutions are distinguished by a high degree of digitization due to their commitment to document the extent of the Nazi genocide. To answer the growing public interest, many started digitizing their archival collections and building databases of Holocaust victims very early. The vast digital resources of Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen, the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, but also smaller Holocaust archives and memorial institutions make digital research much more viable than in other areas of modern history. The volume of scanned documents and other forms of digitization and online availability not only make it easier for researchers to identify and exploit digital sources, but also to directly integrate them into their narratives. The EHRI Document Blog offers an opportunity to experiment with new digital technologies to present and visualize digital Holocaust (and other historical) sources and new forms of historical narration. The blog also provides a space for discussions on the digital methodologies that extend our understanding and the accessibility of Holocaust documentation.

The self-categorization of the platform as a "blog," or a form of scientific blogging, signals the intention to create an open and flexible multidisciplinary interface between experts, students, hobby historians, and the wider public. It is characterized by an inclusive approach to the definition of a researcher. Not only

[6] https://blog.ehri-project.eu/.

do the authors of the articles come from different disciplines, but they are also at very different stages in their careers. MA and PhD students and early career researchers publish there, alongside more senior colleagues already established at universities, research institutes, and in archives. The aim of the blog is to keep a finger on the pulse of Holocaust-related research and to support the presentation and discussion of ongoing projects conducted by historians and researchers in the humanities, digital humanists, archivists, and librarians, or any combination of these specializations. The platform doesn't aspire to become a definitive, comprehensive publication, but rather a part of an ongoing conversation.

The Document Blog is a component of the ongoing support for EHRI to empower its research communities by providing them with access to data and motivating them to adopt new approaches by lowering the threshold for accessing technology, as well as in the form of training. As a dynamic platform, the blog is also a way to foster dialogue with the research community, and it strives to be responsive to their questions and needs. Ideally, the blog also provides EHRI with crucial feedback on how researchers relate to the EHRI Portal and other digital resources and how they search for, view, and process data. The blog also explores the impact of the democratization of access and the changing notion of what constitutes a researcher in the humanities under the impact of digital technologies. Or in other words: it probes how the availability of digital resources and methods changes the way historians and other researchers in the humanities in the field of Holocaust Studies do their job.

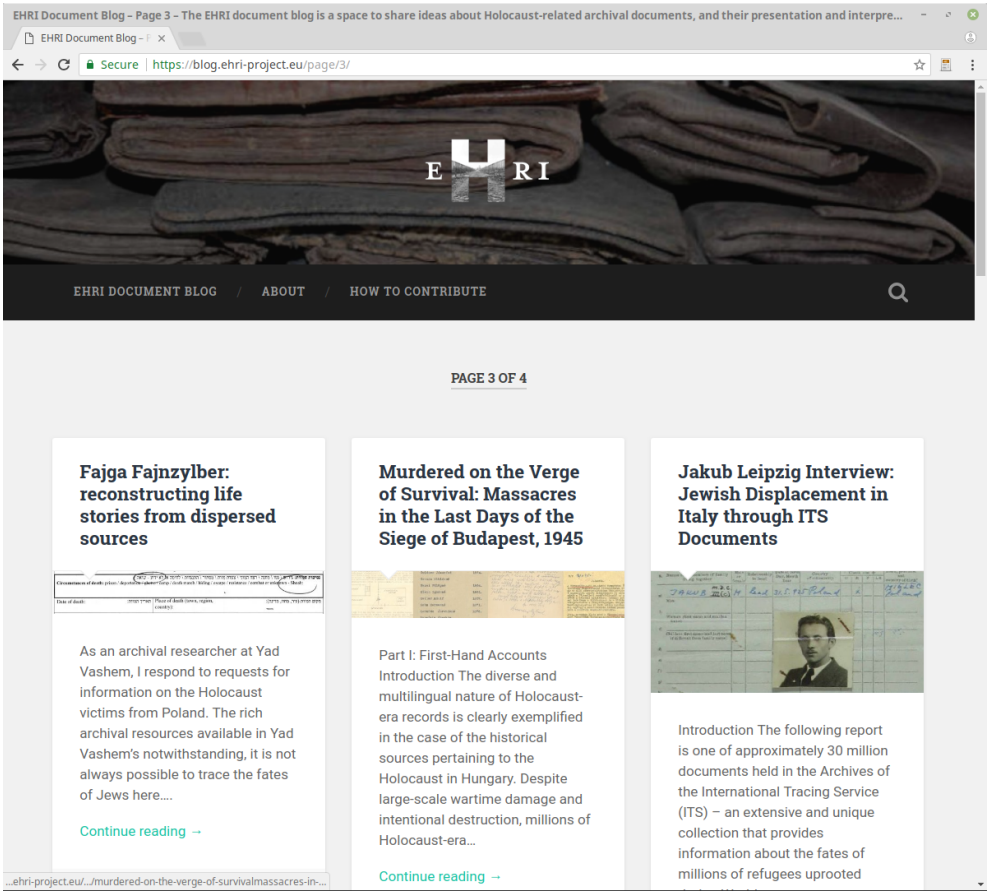


*Fig. 1: Homepage of the EHRI Document Blog*

Unlike the EHRI Portal, which maps the Holocaust-related documentation from above, focusing mainly on collection-level descriptions with structured, standard-compliant, metadata, the Document Blog explores the same subject from below, both in terms of documents and research practices. Designed with small data approaches in mind, it tests how scholarly digital storytelling helps to better decode and understand Holocaust-related documents and archives. Contributors to the blog are encouraged to start from a document, paying attention to its content, format, and language, and possibly also to its visual character and materiality. Furthermore, they are expected to share an idea, experience, or question related to the document, type of documentation, or method. While they are not obliged to do so, contributors are encouraged to take into consideration how the different types of digitally supported visualizations can enhance their analysis or better communicate their interpretation.

In order to connect the narratives as well as visualizations to structured data describing the documents and the related collections, a standard blogging platform (Word Press) is supported by the Omeka, a web application that makes it easy for cultural institutions to publish their collections based on the Dublin Core metadata standard. Contributors should provide metadata for all documents they discuss to be stored in the background installation of Omeka. Building on the cumulative acquisition of metadata, in the future, the project can use the document-level database to enrich collection-level focused descriptions in the EHRI Portal, or to provide a different mode of access to the articles published in the Document Blog.

The Document Blog doesn't lock users in a specific format or technology—contributors can use any method that can be embedded (or even linked to) into the blog, thereby allowing for flexibility and openness. Out-of-the-box, it offers the functionality of the Omeka Neatline plug-ins which make it possible to visually locate documents in time and space, and to construct compelling interactive presentations. Neatline allows one to import and link to standard Omeka (Dublin Core) records and to add further content of any kind. Contributors can create locations, place arbitrary shapes (for instance an arrow) or image over the map, and include further textual descriptions. They can construct timelines linked to the content visualized over the map. The Neatline Text plug-in makes it possible to read a text document alongside the map, and use links to highlight the mentioned places or other types of data. Neatline was chosen not only for its integration with Omeka, but also due to the decisions embedded into its architecture: it was designed mainly with small data in mind, and optimized for hand-made or at least manually finalized visualizations, therefore making it ideal for experimenting with document-driven scientific digital storytelling.

Full disclosure: the author acts as the leader of this effort within the EHRI project, and this article is an attempt to self-position the blog within the broader context of Holocaust-related publication platforms and in the realm of digital humanities, to critically reflect on its first two years, and share plans for the future. It starts by looking at the trends in the contributions published in the first two years and connecting them to current trends in Holocaust documentation and historiography. Its second part explores the role of digital

scientific storytelling with a focus on interactive visualizations, and closes with a reflection on blogging as a part of the research process.

## The Shift to Jewish Sources

Since Hilberg collected the documents for his *The Destruction of European Jews*,[7] the scope of the sources of Holocaust research kept expanding. It still continues to, not only in terms of quantity, but also in nature. While his first book was chiefly based on government-produced documents as well as those produced for the purpose of retribution, historians later started to pay much more attention to documents created by the "victims," whether from individual persecuted Jews, families, or Jewish organizations, making it possible to explore individual agency and reactions to persecutions. Moreover, Holocaust documentation is an active process in which communities and dedicated memorial institutions contribute to extending, organizing, and even creating new types of sources, for instance in the form of tens of thousands of oral history interviews that became available over the past decades. After the fall of the "Iron Curtain," the sources housed in archives in Eastern Europe became more accessible and could be integrated with those in the "West."

The topics and the methods of the contributions to the blog provide some, if limited, insights about current trends in Holocaust documentation and research, and the possible synergies with digital humanities. In its first two years, the Document Blog highlighted a variety of documents and their readings. Characteristically, a disproportional number of articles examined egodocuments or sources created by Jewish organizations. The contributors analyzed testimonies, reports, and documents by Jewish relief organizations and "Jewish Councils," correspondence across the borders of Nazi-occupied Europe, and many others. No longer a neglected research field, this interest is also a testimony to the fact that knowledge of the Holocaust was built outside and often against hegemonic nation(alist) narratives and research structures, with gave egodocuments and the sources of the Jewish organizations a much larger weight.

[7] Of the early editions, see, for instance, Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967).

This trend is illustrated, for instance, by a Yiddish play written by the Finnish Jewish author Jac Weinstein in 1948, one of the less typical documents of Jewish provenance. Simo Muir discusses his discovery of this forgotten artwork in the collections of the Jewish community in Helsinki. Rich in references to Jewish traditions and biblical motives, it provided a way to mourn the victims of the Nazi genocide (the oratorio was probably meant to be performed on *Tisha be Av*). Using a translation interactively overlaid over the scan of an example page and referring to the recent performances of the work by the Performing the Jewish Archive project,[8] Muir brings attention to the text itself and the possibilities for its continued readings and interpretations.[9] On the other hand, the less common "official," state-produced documents are the subject of an article by Jörn Kirschlat, which extends the publication of the collection metadata of the ITS concentration camps collection in the EHRI Portal,[10] discusses the specifics and significance of the collection, and provides example documents that give potential researchers a better grasp of the character of its contents.[11]

More than seventy years after the end of the war, the documentation of the names and fates of those persecuted during World War II remains a major agenda. Archives and memorial institutions receive daily inquiries by family members, communities and schools, memorials, and scientists. Due to the diversity of the lives and persecution trajectories and the fragmentation of the surviving documentation, finding out more about the fates of individuals often requires transnational research involving numerous archives. Several articles deal, from different perspectives, with the documentation of the names of Holocaust victims and its international character. Serafima Velkovich, an archival researcher in Yad Vashem, used her EHRI fellowship at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw to combine fragments of information about an ordinary victim, Fajga Fajnzylber from Lublin. Starting from an inquiry by family

[8] http://ptja.leeds.ac.uk (viewed July 1, 2018).
[9] Simo Muir, "Yiddish Play Manuscript Draws Attention to Early Holocaust Commemoration in Finland," in *EHRI Document Blog*, May 15, 2017, https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2017/05/15/yiddish-play-manuscript-draws-attention-to-early-holocaust-commemoration-in-finland/.
[10] https://portal.ehri-project.eu/units/de-002409-de_its_0_4
[11] Jörn Kischlat, "Online Finding Aid on Nazi Camp History," in *EHRI Document Blog*, October 2, 2017, https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2017/10/02/online-finding-aid-on-nazi-camp-history/.

members, she traced her fate from the Yad Vashem Page of Testimony,[12] through her birth certificate in the Lublin State Archives to her identification card issued by the "Jewish Council" in Lublin in 1940.[13] Daniela Bartáková from the Jewish Museum in Prague took a closer look at the card file of Jews in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, in particular the machine-readable cards, and attempted to decode at least part of the symbols used.[14] On the other hand, Ivelina Nikolova from the EHRI partner Ontotext probed the potential of applying big data approaches and machine learning to the records of Holocaust victims. Using a data set provided by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, she and her colleagues used statistical models as well as input from an expert to cluster together a large number of records with a high probability of representing identical persons.[15]

The history and methodology of the early Holocaust documentation recently attracted historians and other scholars in the humanities, drawing attention to the multi-faceted forms in which the persecution and extermination of Jews was written down and memorialized, bringing back agency to Jewish victims and survivors who, instead of keeping silent, often testified, organized and published.[16] Laura Jockusch re-discovered the work of the post-World War II Jewish historical committees, which—in a massive transnational effort—collected testimonies, original documents, artwork, and other materials.[17] The EHRI project organized two workshops on the Holocaust collections and

[12] http://yvng.yadvashem.org/nameDetails.html?language=en&itemId=10601997.

[13] Serafima Velkovich, "Fajga Fajnzylber: Reconstructing Life Stories from Dispersed Sources," *EHRI Document Blog*, March 10, 2017, https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2017/03/10/fajga-fajnzylber-reconstructing-life-stories-from-dispersed-sources/.

[14] Daniela Bartáková, "Card File of the Jewish Population in the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia," *EHRI Document Blog*, September 11, 2017, https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2017/09/11/card-file-of-the-jewish-population/.

[15] Ivelina Nikolova, "Person Records Linking in the USHMM Survivors and Victims Database," in *EHRI Document Blog*, May 29, 2018, https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2018/05/29/person-records-linking-in-the-ushmm-survivors-and-victims-database/.

[16] David Cesarani and Eric J. Sundquist, *After the Holocaust. Challenging the Myth of Silence* (London; New York: Routledge, 2012); Regina Fritz, Éva Kovács and Béla Rásks, *Als der Holocaust noch keinen Namen hatte. Zur frühen Aufarbeitung des NS-Massenmordes an den Juden = Before the Holocaust Had Its Name. Early Confrontations of the Nazi Mass Murder of the Jews, Beiträge zur Holocaustforschung des Wiener Wiesenthal Instituts für Holocaust-Studien 2*, (Wien: Wiener Wiesenthal Institut für Holocaust-Studien. new academic press, 2016); Hasia R. Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love. American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust*, 1945-1962, (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

[17] Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

testimonies created during or shortly after the war, and an online edition of samples of early testimonies from different archives in several languages is in preparation. The perhaps 18 thousand testimonies from these documentation projects, in Yiddish, Polish, Hungarian, and many other languages—different from later, mostly more narrative, reflective, and emotional accounts and often resembling judicial protocols—remain to be only reluctantly used by researchers to this day.

Testimony, especially its "early" forms, is one of the core focus areas of the Document Blog— working with examples that have caught the interest of researchers and archivists, it attempts to explore characteristics, probe digital approaches, and broaden the typology of "early" testimony. It covers the corpora created by the historical committees, but also expands beyond them to highlight other forms of testimonial documents. Michał Czajka and Magdalena Sedlická focused on a sample testimony from the collections of the postwar documentation committees secured in the archives of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw and the Jewish Museum in Prague respectively. The testimony of Alter Ogień is one of only twelve surviving documents of the first Polish Jewish historical committee established in August 1944 in Lublin, immediately after the Soviet liberation. Recorded in Yiddish and written down by pencil, without any formalized format, the testimony is the oldest in the Institute's archives and was later integrated into the much larger corpus of seven thousand such documents collected by the Polish Central Jewish Historical Commission.[18] Valerie Straussová's story was recorded as part of a much less known and smaller Czechoslovak Jewish Documentation Campaign.[19]

Characteristically for this kind of early testimony, both related only to wartime persecution, leaving out pre-war life and identities. We learn nothing about their families before the occupation, their religiosity, political affiliation or, for instance, the languages spoken. While Straussová briefly recounts what happened to her family members, Ogień's wife appears in the story for the first time in a sentence mentioning that she joined him in hiding in a village close to Łęczna; we learn only later that she was liberated with him—and no more than

[18]Michał Czajka, "Alter Ogień Testimony – the Earliest Testimony in the ŻIH Collection," in *EHRI Document Blog*, June 24, 2017, https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2017/06/24/alter-ogien/.
[19]Magdalena Sedlická, "Testimony of Valerie Straussová," in *EHRI Document Blog*, March 11, 2016, https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2016/03/11/testimony-of-valerie-straussova/.

this. In the immediate aftermath, both narrators (as well their interviewers) found it essential to refrain from the personal in favor of documenting events such as razzias, deportations, ghettos, and killings. Ogień's narrative starts in November 1939, with the first encounter with Germans in Warsaw; Straussová's only in February 1942 with her deportation to the Theresienstadt ghetto.

In direct and factual language, both survivors reproduce shocking events, and both are focused on encounters with Germans and their brutality. Ogień describes the day-to-day humiliation of Jews in Warsaw against the background of the establishment of the ghetto. Starved and exhausted by hard work, he escaped and traveled illegally via Lublin to Łęczna where no ghetto existed yet. However, we learn nothing about how he knew that and why he made this decision. Without sharing much about his own fate, he testifies about killings in Łęczna and villages nearby and deportations to Treblinka.

Straussová's remarkable testimony focuses on the murder of a group of weak and ill women on a death march from Schlesiersee. Atypically for this type of short testimony from the immediate post-war time, she describes in great detail her feelings during the killings in which she herself was shot in the back. When she found out that instead of a promised evacuation by truck, the entire group would be executed, she felt completely composed and reconciled with her inevitable death. Standing in front of a ditch, waiting to be shot, she recounted—in contrast to the brutality of the moment—how she thought of the beauty of the winter night and the shining moon. Once she realized that she was only lightly wounded, Straussová crawled into the nearby forest from where she witnessed the execution of her fellow prisoners. Only then, in her words, did she become agitated. After painfully wandering through beautiful forests, she survived in a Polish village until being liberated by the Red Army.

The format of this type of testimony, typical for the Czechoslovak Jewish documentation and other similar projects, also merits attention. Resembling a police or judicial protocol, it starts with the phrase "I, the undersigned […] giving my true testimony […] declare and swear that everything stated is true" and closes with the signatures of the survivor and witnesses, as well as the stamp of the Documentation Campaign. Straussová also offers to lead the authorities to the location of the execution: "I know the exact location of the place, where forty women were executed and I am willing to show this place to the

authorities." And indeed, the very selection of the topic as well as her later testimonies indicates that bringing perpetrators to justice was a driving force. Among several testimonies Straussová gave over the years, including an audio testimony for the Jewish Museum in Prague in 1994, one was during the trial of Karl Rahm, the last commander of the Theresienstadt ghetto, another for the Nuremberg Trials, and yet another in 1977 for a trial of perpetrators at the labor camp in Schlesiersee. A comparison of her testimonies, their topics, and languages, would be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Yet another facet of early testimony was analyzed by Christine Schmidt on an example of post-World War II eyewitness reports from the collection of the Wiener Library in London. Focusing on the process of recording, editing, and annotating the testimony of Helen Hirsch, a Christian from a "mixed marriage" in Czechoslovakia, she highlighted the methodology of Eva Reichmann, one of the early Holocaust historians. In contrast to the current focus on the authenticity and subjectivity of testimony, Reichmann emphasized meticulous verification and factual correctness: the annotated typed transcript of an interview shows how she corrected mistakes whenever they contradicted known "objective" facts. Schmidt notes that in this and similar interviews, recorded "in the third-person, authored and arguably, further mediated by the interviewer […] it is sometimes difficult to determine where the voice and intentions of the interviewer has superseded that of the interviewee."[20]

[20] Christine Schmidt, "Visualising Methodology in The Wiener Library's Early Testimonies' Project," in *EHRI Document Blog*, January 16, 2018, https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2018/01/16/visualising-methodology-in-the-wiener-librarys-early-testimonys-project/.

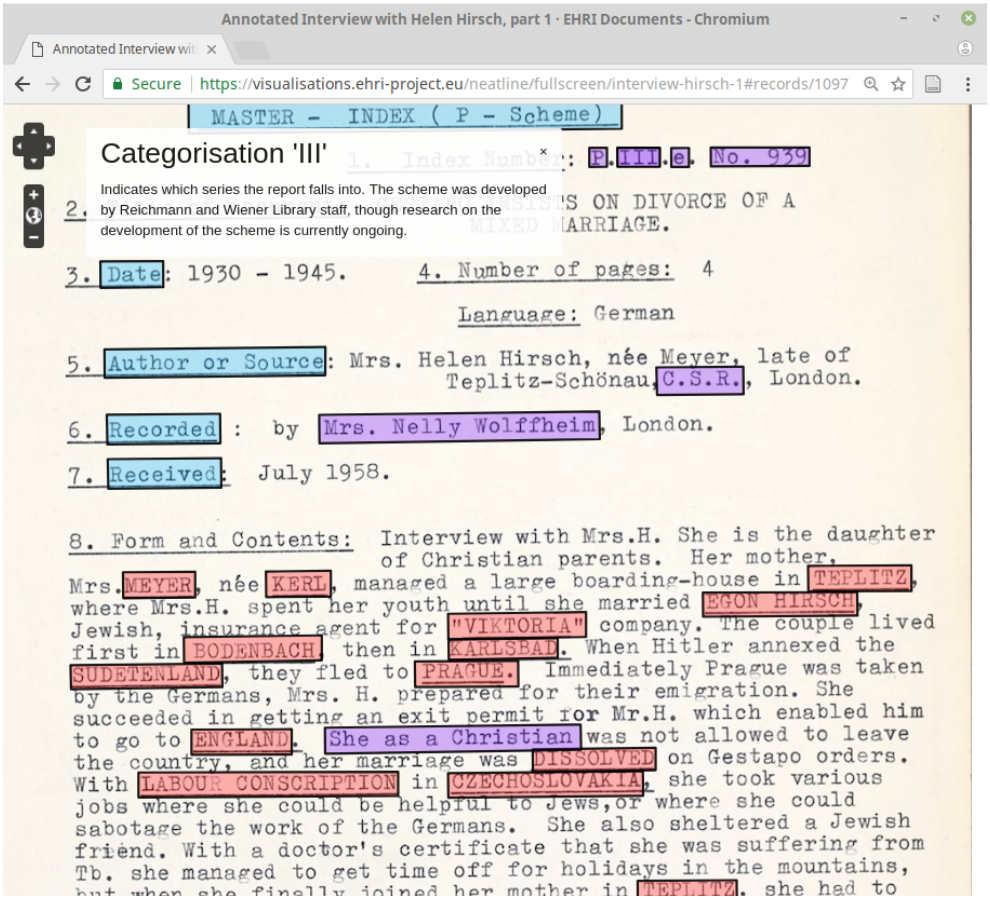


*Fig. 2: Annotated page from the testimony of Helen Hirsch*

Testimony, indeed, can encompass very different types of documents. Not only those formally taken down to capture a life story or an episode, but also other materials were and are considered to be testimony. Jessica Green from the Wiener Library discussed a testimony *sui generis*, a collection of short letters by children from the first German *Kindertransport* in December 1938, written as they were traveling through the Netherlands. While not created as a testimony about specific events or life trajectories, the transcripts were nevertheless added to the collection of 365 eyewitness testimonies gathered by Alfred Wiener's Central Jewish Information Office in Amsterdam after the November Pogrom of 1938 (the *Kristallnacht*).[21] The "translation" of the letters from a private document into "testimony" on the persecution of Jews, and the Jewish relief,

[21] Jessica Green, "Letters from Children on the First Kindertransport," in *EHRI Document Blog*, April 20, 2016, https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2016/04/20/letters-from-kindertransport-children/.

is—from the perspective of the documentation of the Holocaust—as interesting as their moving content.

Beyond these large corpora of testimonies collected by Jewish documentation projects, it is important to explore those in other, sometimes less expected, locations. Chiara Renzo discusses the interview with Jakub Leipzig located in the archives of the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen. Conducted and written down in the third person by a UN official in 1949 in Milano, the relatively short and emotionless third-person document tracks his path from the Polish town of Mielec, through ghettos and concentration camps, to the post-liberation DP camps. For instance: "In December 1941 the subject together with his relatives was sent by Germans to a GHETTO at DEBICA (POLAND). In that Ghetto the subject remained interned till 1942, and was sent often from there as forced labourer to the different works."[22] Reading the protocol, one of the many documents in his file in the ITS archives, it is essential to keep in mind its purpose—to validate his claim for international support and resettlement.

The variety of testimonial documents discussed in the EHRI Document Blog contribute to a broader conversation about testimony and its role in the further study of the Holocaust. Historians and social scientists explore early documentation projects, ask what establishes a testimony, compare its early forms to the more recent interviews,[23] or, for instance, examine the potential for their presentation in the digital environment.

## Visualizing Places and Spaces

Over the past decade, the 'spatial turn' significantly enriched Holocaust Studies. Spatial policies were an essential element of the Nazi persecution and exclusion of Jews, from moving state borders, through the definition of inaccessible spaces, up to the construction of ghettos and camps. Recent studies focus not only on

[22] Chiara Renzo, "Jakub Leipzig Interview: Jewish Displacement in Italy through ITS Documents," in *EHRI Document Blog*, January 23, 2017, https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2017/01/23/jakub-leipzig-interview-jewish-displacement-in-italy-through-its-documents/.

[23] Sharon Kangisser Cohen, *Testimony and Time: Holocaust Survivors Remember*, (Jerusalem: Yad va-shem-International Institute for Holocaust Research, 2014).

physical places and landscapes, but also incorporate insights from cultural geography and the construction of social space. The Holocaust can't be understood without research in how spaces, both physical and social, were created, transformed, and appropriated by perpetrators, victims, and the evasive group of 'bystanders.' For instance, Andrew Charlesworth explored the topographies of the concentration camps, with their landscapes and physical features, often omitted by eyewitnesses and ignored by historians.[24] The Holocaust Geographies Collaborative working group played a pioneering role by experimenting with different sets of data, methodologies, and forms of visualization, and applying them at different scales. "Collaborative" in the title of this working group referred to its interdisciplinary nature. The resulting visualizations and studies, such as the mobility in the Budapest ghetto, arrests of Italian Jews, or the construction of the concentration camps system,[25] were only possible thanks to the enriching collaboration between historians and geographers.[26] Tim Cole, in his recent *Holocaust Landscapes*, discussed different types of spaces (such as ghetto, train, forest, etc.), and explored the Holocaust as a "place-making event," as well as the spatial strategies deployed by Jewish actors.[27]

The EHRI Document Blog makes it easier for authors to engage with the research in Holocaust geographies by constructing spatial or spatiotemporal visualizations. In the first, rather experimental, article, this author used a report by Marie Schmolka, a Czechoslovak Jewish relief activist, to lead the readers through the No Man's Land for refugees in 1938. Locating these places along the shifting borders of Czechoslovakia after the Munich Agreement and the First Vienna Award, the presentation shows the negative impact of the territorial revisions on the refugee policies of the states in East-Central Europe.[28] Or, in a contribution about forced laborers in the water works in the Lublin District,[29] Frank Grelka provides only a brief introduction on the phenomenon of rural

[24] Andrew Charlesworth, "The Topography of Genocide," in *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. Dan Stone, (Basingstoke-Hampshire-New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004), 216–52.
[25] https://web.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/project.php?id=1015.
[26] Alberto Giordano, Anne Kelly Knowles and Tim Cole, *Geographies of the Holocaust*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).
[27] Tim Cole, *Holocaust Landscapes*, (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016).
[28] Frankl, "Reports from the No Man's Land."
[29] Frank Grelka, "Forced Labourers and the Water Works Camps in the Lublin District," in *EHRI Document Blog*, October 23, 2017, https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2017/10/23/water-works-camps/.

forced labor in the General Government and allows for the exploration of the details of the individual places of origin, transport routes, and camps through the interactive map. Clicking, for instance, on the point representing Osowa, the reader finds out, along with the dates of their deployment, that the forced laborers sent to work in melioration came from Warsaw, learns more about their deportation via Deblin, Lublin, Pulawy, and Sobibor, and can follow their 16-kilometers-long march to reach Osowa.[30]

László Csősz used an interactive map to offer an enhanced perspective on the space and to make it easier to grasp the perceptions of the deportees. Exploring the conditions of a march of Hungarian Jewish slave laborers from Budapest towards Austria in November 1944, using a number of documents from Hungarian archives, he not only connects the order of the Ministry of the Interior with the map, but replaces dots typically used to mark places with interactive weather icons. Clicking on the cloud-with-rain icon for Szőny, for instance, the reader finds out that, after four days on the road, prisoners were marching in temperatures of 3° to 5.4° C and in pouring rain.[31]

Nevertheless, the map presentations in the EHRI Document Blog remain far from perfect. The lack of reliable, open and, standard-compliant historical geographic data, or the difficulty of their deployment, make developing GIS applications and other map presentations time consuming and beyond possibility for many. To rely on Google Maps or OpenStreetMap as the background layer in the presentations (currently, the EHRI Document Blog can't combine such map services with the digitized historical maps in its out-of-the-box services) is obviously limiting. While this allows it to present basic topographic features, it can also lead to bizarre visual encounters and confrontations with changed landscapes, street plans, and administrative borders. In the future, it would be desirable to replace these map services with historically more accurate ones, probably by providing a dedicated server for geospatial data. The functionality of Neatline, or any other comparable tool for that matter, doesn't by itself offer the instruments and produce the knowledge of professional cartographers. The EHRI project doesn't have the capacity, at

[30] https://visualisations.ehri-project.eu/neatline/fullscreen/wasserwirtschaftslager#records/925.
[31] László Csősz, "Death Blows Overhead: The Last Transports from Hungary, November 1944," in *EHRI Document Blog*, November 23, 2017, https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2017/11/23/hungary-1944/.

this stage, to support authors—who typically lack this background—by engaging geographers and cartographers in the same way that the Holocaust Geographies Collaborative does.

Perhaps even more limiting was the lack of open and standardized data sets on historical borders, ghettos, and camps. In order to provide at least basic data on the shifting state boundaries that allow one to capture the territorial expansion of Nazi Germany and the effects of the proximity or distance of borders on the events and phenomena discussed in the articles, the EHRI team adopted the data made available by the Holocaust Geographies Collaborative used for visualizing the "Building of the New Order," and published at the project website of the Stanford Spatial History Lab.[32] Capturing month-by-month changes to European borders from the *Anschluss* of Austria in 1938 to the liberation in 1945, the data set is based on the evaluation and digitization of about one hundred historical maps of different type, scale and, geographic or administrative focus. For the purposes of the EHRI Document Blog and other EHRI digital publications, the borders were imported into Omeka and a simple Omeka plug-in was developed to help with adding locations with geographic data into the specific format and geographic projection used.[33] In several cases, EHRI corrected mistakes that were typically caused by the lower resolution of the data set: for instance the borders close to Theresienstadt where the ghetto appeared on the wrong side of the border of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

In the near future, the Document Blog will be able to exploit new data sets developed by EHRI for ghettos and camps during the Holocaust. Recently, based on its previous development of controlled vocabularies and on data from partner institutions, especially from the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos[34] and from Yad Vashem, EHRI started a Wikidata project to collate, enrich, and collaboratively develop data on ghettos

[32] Michael De Groot, "Building the New Order: 1938-1945," *Spatial History Project*, Stanford University, August 24, 2010 https://web.stanford.edu/group/spatialhistory/cgi-bin/site/pub.php?id=51&project_id=.
[33] https://github.com/EHRI/NeatlineFeatureImport.
[34] Geoffrey P. Megargee, Martin Dean, and Melvin Hecker, *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945, vol. I-II* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2009). The first two volumes of the encyclopedia are now available for free download at: https://www.ushmm.org/research/publications/encyclopedia-camps-ghettos.

in Nazi-occupied Europe.[35] The data also contain geographic locations, thus making it possible to import it into other applications and build rich map presentations demonstrating the development of the Nazi ghettos.[36] The EHRI project plans to continue with a similar project for concentration and extermination camps.

The from-below experiments with Holocaust geographies in the Document Blog therefore point towards the desirability and potential of building open data sets that can be used by the Document Blog and other applications. In the future, optimally EHRI would help to create and curate such data sets in cooperation with other projects.

## The Power of Visualization

Visualizations projecting documents over maps and timelines proved to be, starting with the very first article,[37] a clear attraction for both authors and readers, and developed into the Document Blog's signature feature. This made clear the hunger among historians and archivists to apply such methods to their own data and often, at the same time, exposed their lack of experience and/or skills with doing so. Visualizations, however, are not an end in themselves, but rather means of re-thinking the document as well as the narrative. In deploying these tools, the platform is less focused on technological progress, but rather on researchers' use and interaction with technology. Experimenting with the methods of digital storytelling in the rapidly developing field of digital technology is one way the EHRI Document Blog allows authors to critically think about the sources of Holocaust research. It provides a glimpse into the changing practices of research, writing, and dissemination in the digital age—in other words, it probes how the availability of digital resources (digitized archival documents, databases of Holocaust victims, and other data sets) and tools affects researchers and what challenges and hurdles this presents.

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[35] https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q2583015; list of ghettos in the EHRI Wikidata project (including duplicate records collated from different sources): http://tinyurl.com/ycymunql.

[36] Nancy Cooey, "Using Wikidata to Build an Authority List of Holocaust-Era Ghettos," in *EHRI Document Blog*, February 12, 2018, https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2018/02/12/using-wikidata/.

[37] Michal Frankl, "Reports from the No Man's Land," in *EHRI Document Blog*, January 19, 2016, https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2016/01/19/reports-from-the-no-mans-land/.

Through the visualizations and the inclusion of data, the Document Blog experiments with different types of narration. It motivates authors to develop non-linear narratives by weaving their text together with interactive components, thus letting their readers discover the subject in different ways and to "read" through the article along different trajectories. This non-linear approach makes it easier for end users to explore the original sources on which the (hi)story is based, collection descriptions, related taxonomies, and, most importantly interactive presentations visualizing the documents in time and space and enriching them with contextual information. It also makes it possible to build-in source criticism in a novel and more experiential way. On the other hand, not having full control over the reader's path through the material can also be challenging for authors.

For instance, visualizations of Holocaust testimony (placing the text alongside a map which connects the narrative with a map/timeline visualization and allowing one to follow the personal story in space and time) illustrate the possibilities of non-linear narratives. The visualizations are deployed not to lead away from the narrative of the testimony itself, but to enhance its close reading (as opposed to distant reading, which caused a stir in the discussions at the crossroads between literary studies and digital humanities).[38] Hence, while not always with high resolution, these visualizations are no abstract aggregations resulting in simplification and error introduced by the translation from original texts to high-level presentation.[39] In future, in addition to close reading, integration of further, in particular linguistic, tools, allowing for a more distant view of the texts and their aggregation, would be desirable.

[38] This debate was in particular triggered by Franco Moretti's case for the distant reading of literary sources in *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History*, (London; Brooklyn: Verso, 2007).

[39] For the—perhaps artificial—dichotomy between close and distant reading, see the excellent assay: Anne Kelly Knowles, "A More Humane Approach to Digital Scholarship," in *Parameters* (blog), August 3, 2016, http://parameters.ssrc.org/2016/08/a-more-humane-approach-to-digital-scholarship/.

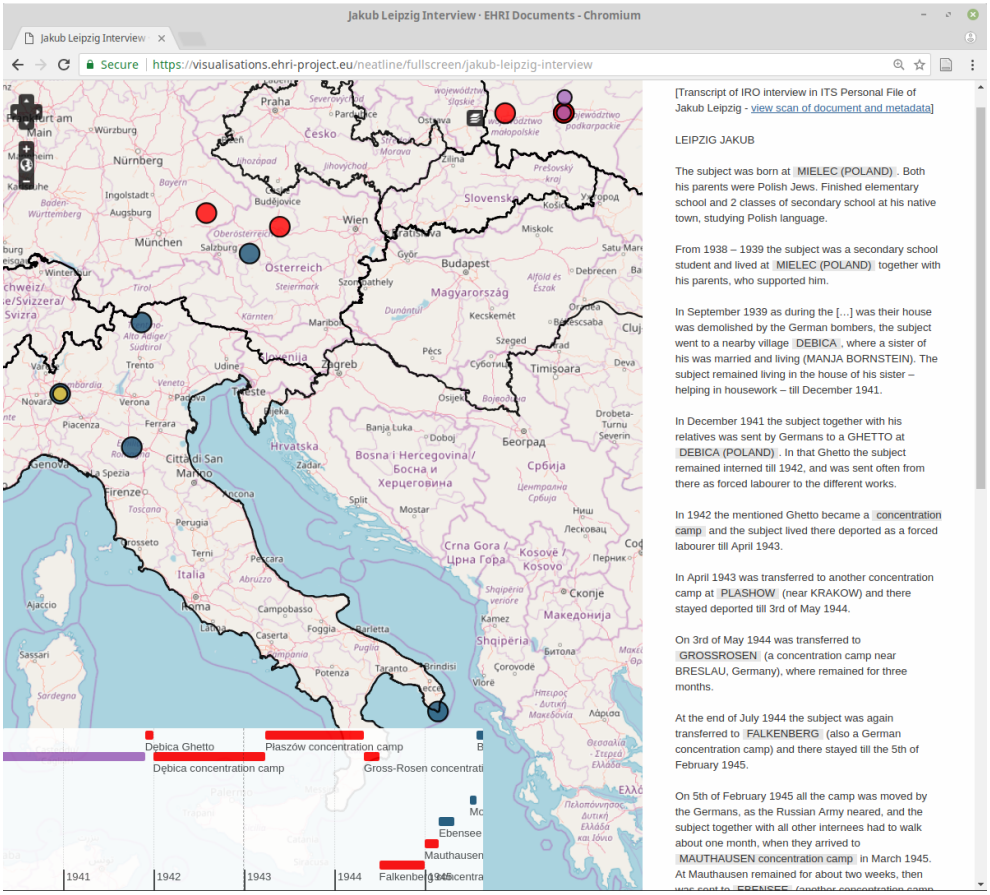


*Fig. 3: Visualization connecting map and text of the* Jakub Leipzig interview

Interactive elements built on top of these presentations can also help to train future researchers, the specialized and experienced ones as well as hobby researchers and genealogists, to use and understand the document, its structure, the meaning of typical sections as well as language(s). Bartáková, for instance, uses a Neatline presentation to annotate one of the machine-readable cards and to explain the meaning of the individual fields, as much as it could be ascertained. Or, in an article on the death certificates from the Theresienstadt (Terezín) ghetto, Wolfgang Schellenbacher annotates the form of Gabriel Frankl, who died in the ghetto on February 13, 1943.[40] For instance, deciphering the code "E IIIa" as *Geniekaserne* and explaining its function at the time of the death as "an old

[40] Wolfgang Schellenbacher, "Death Certificate of Gabriel Frankl from the Terezín Ghetto," in *EHRI Document Blog*, February 18, 2016, https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2016/02/18/death-certificate-of-gabriel-frankl-from-the-terezin-ghetto/.

people's home and a division of the ghetto hospital,"[41] he demonstrates the meaning of the form and its fields even for those who don't understand the original language and lack expert knowledge of the history of the ghetto. Since approximately twenty thousand death certificates (the originals are located in the National Archives in Prague) are available online[42] (for about two-thirds of the inmates who died in Theresienstadt), making their structure, content, and contexts easier to understand has significant research potential.

EHRI plays an important role in facilitating access to such data, and the Document Blog supports the use of EHRI resources as a point of authoritative reference for citations of archival collections and other data, such as archives, personalities, camps and ghettos, and keywords in scholarly texts. An open source shortcode plug-in for Word Press,[43] developed by Michael Bryant from Kings College London for usage in the Blog and beyond, makes it possible to easily embed formatted data provided via the EHRI API.[44] Using the same layout as records from an EHRI Portal listing or result set, it creates a coherent interface and makes it easier to navigate through the information. In this way, it also helps to assess the relevance of the content of the EHRI Portal for Holocaust Studies, or what it lacks. The potential gaps exposed in the Document Blog can become an impetus for the identification of new collections, and adding new descriptions to the EHRI Portal. A version of the shortcode plug-in has also been prepared for Omeka, and other web applications can embed EHRI content in a similar fashion using iframes (with the obvious limitations of this approach). The plug-in can be easily reproduced for other applications and platforms, making it easy to integrate well-formatted and up-to-date references to EHRI data.

Yet, the research process also challenges researchers to deal with uncertainty. No visualization, based on a map, timeline, or in any other form, is indeed a true one-to-one representation of reality or the richer representation in textual sources. In keeping with the critical approach, blog contributors are also expected to explain the sources of their visualizations, their methods and to make clear the

[41] https://visualisations.ehri-project.eu/neatline/fullscreen/death-certificate#records/81.
[42] Through the www.holocaust.cz portal; see, for instance, the death certificate of Gabriel Frankl, linked to further information about his fate from the database of Holocaust victims: http://www.holocaust.cz/en/database-of-digitised-documents/document/94712-frankl-gabriel-death-certificate-ghetto-terezin/.
[43] https://github.com/EHRI/ehri-wordpress-plugin.
[44] https://portal.ehri-project.eu/api.

way in which it was constructed. Specifically, they should expose the uncertainty regarding the content or the interpretation of the document. For instance, Chiara Renzo notes that, in many cases, only approximate locations of the wartime camps and post-war DP-camps mentioned in the testimony of Jakub Leipzig were identified, and the locations of the towns and villages with the same name had to be used instead. Extensive additional research would be required to provide a micro-historical, map-driven narrative. Similarly, in constructing his weather indicators, László Csősz had—as he explains in his article—to resort to certain approximations, since for some locations weather reports were unavailable.

Gaps in the contextual information that affects the visualizations as well as interpretation were omnipresent in the blog contributions. For instance, barely anything is known about the narrator, Alter Ogień, beyond what was recorded in the 1944 protocol. Likewise, the further fate of Jakub Leipzig is unclear: the ITS records only make clear that, his request to resettle to the United States notwithstanding, he was still living as a refugee by 1953. How the *Kindertransport* letters were transformed into a testimonial format also remains unclear: the transcriptions were prepared by an anonymous person, possibly from the circle of Jewish relief workers, and were sent to the JCIO by a Mr. Flörsheim, about whom no further information is provided. We know even less about how these transcripts were selected out of a larger set of letters. The ongoing conversation about uncertainty and knowledge gaps are an important element of researching through blogging.

When László Csősz, archivist in the Hungarian National Archives and member of the EHRI team, started to work on his article about the massacres in Budapest shortly before the liberation by the Red Army (which he co-authored together with his colleague Laura Csonka), he thought of creating a presentation to visually communicate what he already knew to the readers of their article. Yet, as he, in cooperation with other EHRI staff, continued building the presentation, locating the last days of the Budapest ghetto on the map, he realized that such a visualization bore fruit for him as well: for the first time, he could grasp the very proximity of events taking place in Budapest. Placing the massacres of Jews perpetrated by the Arrow Cross militias in January 1945, just before the liberation, onto the historical map of Budapest, he realized just how

close these events were to the front line.[45] In other words: the hands-on experience with constructing the map visualization helped him grasp the issues of proximity and distance and the perception of space in a city divided by the advancing front.

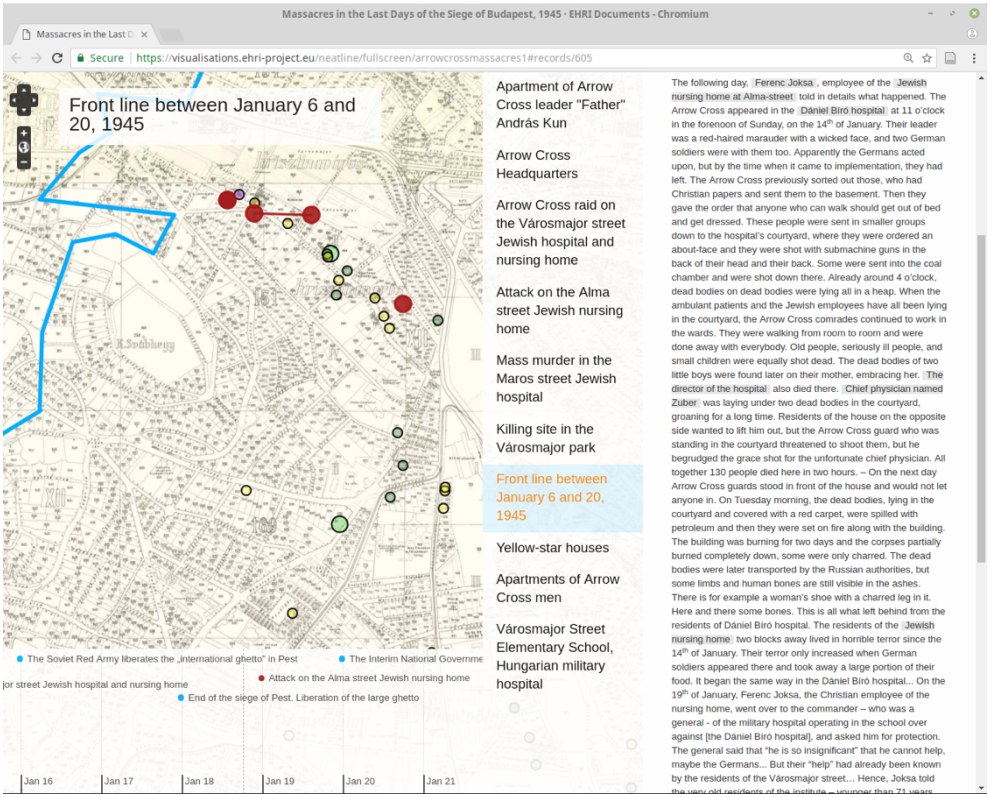


*Fig. 4: Map visualization for the article about the massacres during the last days fo the Budapest ghetto*

This case illustrates that such interactive content shouldn't only be considered a form of illustration or dissemination, a form of public history, nor is it a hands-on experience limited to training authors in the humanities to use digital methods. More than this, learning by doing, or blogging, is also part of the research process yielding new observations and knowledge, which can feed back into the textual interpretation. Something similar was experienced by the editors of the Geographies of the Holocaust, who conclude: "Visualizing has the potential to uncover things that may otherwise be invisible within textual

[45] László Csősz and Laura Csonka, "Murdered on the Verge of Survival: Massacres in the Last Days of the Siege of Budapest, 1945," in *EHRI Document Blog*, February 8, 2017, https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2017/02/08/murdered-on-the-verge-of-survivalmassacres-in-the-last-days-of-the-siege-of-budapest-1945/.

sources."[46] The EHRI Document Blog illustrates that science blogging helps to record and understand research processes and to bring forward new ideas.

## Research Incubator

The EHRI Document Blog is part of the trend of scientific blogging, such as the fast-growing hypotheses.org, and there is vivid debate about its function and contribution to scholarly work. It is guided by similar principles as other blogging sites: it aims to create a space for more open, easier and faster communication, which fosters creativity and supports early career researchers to share their sources, findings, and ideas, and position themselves in their research field.[47]

However, in its editorial procedure and control over published articles, it does differ from many other comparable platforms and positions itself in the space between a typical blog and a more formal scholarly journal. While the blog starts from the broad definition of a researcher and the initiative of historians, archivists, and others drives it forward, it is not completely self-organized, and the EHRI editorial team keeps a stricter control over thematic coherence and the publication process. The production of contributions, from their proposal through implementation to publication, is conducted under the supervision and assistance of the EHRI staff. Contributors can suggest articles through an online form or in direct communication with the editors. If needed, the editors can make sure that the contributions don't go off-topic, slip into private or political statements, and correspond to basic standards of academic discussion (in the first two years, however, there was no need for such an intervention). The editors also strive to control the publication interval so that blog articles appear at a regular pace.

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[46] Giordano, Kelly Knowles and Cole, *Geographies of the Holocaust*, 8.

[47] Peter Haber, Eva Pfanzelter and Julia Schreiner, *Historyblogosphere. Bloggen in den Geschichtswissenschaften*, (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2013); Mareike König, "Blogs als Wissensorte der Forschung," in *Die Zukunft der Wissensspeicher. Forschen, Sammeln und Vermitteln im 21. Jahrhundert*, eds. Jürgen Mittelstraß and Ulrich Rüdiger, (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2016), 105–22; Anna Mauranen, "Hybridism, Edutainment, and Doubt: Science Blogging Finding Its Feet," in *Nordic Journal of English Studies 12*/1 (2013): 7–36; Cornelius Puschmann and Merja Mahrt, "Scholarly Blogging. A New Form of Publishing or Science Journalism 2.0?" in *Science and the Internet*, ed. Alexander Tokar, (Düsseldorf: Dup, 2012), 171–81.

Yet, this stricter approach is less motivated by the dogma of quality control as applied in scholarly journals, but rather by the specific topics of the field and the editorial process tailored for multidisciplinary approaches, in particular helping historians and archivists deploy digital tools.
Even though the blog articles tend to be shorter and sometimes display a lesser academic ambition, the core difference in comparison to scholarly journals lies in the publication process. The peer review process, accepted as a standard in the realm of academic journals, has been criticized for its possible tendency to impose disciplinary standards, and for a possible suspicion to novel, untested, and unrecognized approaches. Reshaping the peer-review for the purpose of multi or transdisciplinary research is a challenge in its own right.[48]

In the traditional editorial process, authors can typically be expected to possess the competence to prepare a complete submission, perhaps apart from selected illustrations such as maps and graphics. Yet, the preparation of the contributions to the Document Blog made clear the challenges of such an approach when historical writing is combined with digital humanities. For instance, the process of crafting presentations with Neatline, as powerful as this tool might be, is confusing for less experienced users and can prove time-consuming even for those more comfortable with technology. More generally, the editorial process of the Document Blog exposes the learning curve related to the application of technology-supported non-linear narratives. Even authors among EHRI partner institutions often require extensive support to use the available tools. The EHRI staff typically offers constant direction and often assists in building and testing the interactive content. This way, the blog developed into a laboratory of digitally supported writing and publication.

Rather than a formalized procedure, such as the peer-review, experimenting with new approaches and crossing the digital threshold requires cooperation across specializations and a more flexible editorial process. The EHRI Document Blog doesn't aspire to become a scholarly journal with a strict process of submission and evaluation of contributions through the peer-review process. While keeping

[48] J. Britt Holbrook, "Peer Review," in *The Oxford Handbook of Interdisciplinarity*, I, ed. Robert Frodeman, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 321–32, http://media.obvsg.at/AC08139408-1001; see also Ben Kaden, *Library 2.0 und Wissenschaftskommunikation*, (Berlin: Simon, 2009), 79–101.

an eye on the scientific relevance of the contributions, it deploys what could roughly be described as an agile editorial process in which researchers, archivists, and experts in digital humanities work interactively together, and learn from each other. Instead of a rigid selection and evaluation process, the platform emphasizes communication with authors and provides assistance in different phases of the preparation of the contributions.

The EHRI Document Blog aspires to operate alongside scholarly journals in the field whereby the originally more experimental contributions in the blog could potentially grow into full scholarly articles, perhaps relying on the visualizations developed here. In this and other ways, the blog functions as an incubator in which sources and ideas, narrative methods, and visualizations can be tested and contested, discussed, and curated.

## Perspectives and Challenges

Since its launch in January 2016 and through June 2018, 29 contributions discussing a variety of Holocaust sources and approaches by researchers from different disciplines were published in the EHRI Document Blog. Starting from posts prepared by historians and archivists from within the project,[49] its production increasingly draws experts from the broader fields of Holocaust Studies and Digital Humanities, including the recipients of EHRI fellowships who report on their findings during their stay at an EHRI partner institution. In 2018, the blog was regularly updated every three weeks and enjoyed approximately 800 visits per month, and this number is growing.

True to its experimental character, the future development of the EHRI Document Blog is indeed an open-ended process. The platform was built from the bottom and was informed by the interaction between the EHRI staff and the contributing researchers. However, as it grows more representative of current trends in historiography, archival science, and digital humanities, the project team plans to better sort the content into categories, thus enabling an analysis

[49] EHRI Work package 12, "New views on digital archives," led by the Jewish Museum in Prague, together with the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, the Hungarian Jewish Archives in Budapest, the Wiener Library in London, the Kings College London, and Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

and discussion of the specific types of Holocaust sources. As of the writing of this article, a new layout is in preparation that will be adapted to the visualizations and data returned by the EHRI API, but also provide a better user interface to search and explore the growing number of documents, ideas, and methods. The EHRI team will also re-evaluate the ways to make articles better citable (for instance through shorter URLs, DOIs and an ISSN).

In the future, the blog will also become a testing ground for another challenge: to keep the content, and in particular the visualizations, functional. The Vectors journal,[50] which experiments with the intersections of culture and technology, can serve both as an inspiration and as a warning. Published between 2005 and 2013, the content—mostly consisting of interactive presentations based on now outdated technologies—is today frozen and archived, with a large part of the contributions no longer functional. The EHRI infrastructure is indeed well positioned to sustain the platform over a long period of time and to upgrade the presentations as needed. It is, however, possible that at some later point it will no longer be possible to maintain the technologies used and that the project will have to search for ways to archive the content while documenting as much of the functionality of the interactive elements as possible.

The engagement of the readers' community through commenting, optimally a form of open post review, poses yet another challenge. In practice, contributions in the Document Blog triggered only a few comments from users,[51] mostly on articles that spoke to a broader community, including Holocaust survivors and their families. The publishers will consider changes to the layout to make commenting more attractive, but it is unlikely that this trend will dramatically change in the future. On the other hand, within the EHRI community and the broader circle of Holocaust researchers, the blog has generated more traffic on social media and elsewhere. In at least one case, the articles were used as examples of approaches to Holocaust documents in a university course. The success of the blog, however, can be measured on the interest of potential authors inspired by the style and functionality of the previous blog posts.

[50] http://vectors.usc.edu

[51] See a similar finding in Mareike König, "Die Entdeckung der Vielfalt: Geschichtsblogs auf der internationalen Plattform hypotheses.org," in *Historyblogosphere. Bloggen in den Geschichtswissenschaften*, eds. Haber, Pfanzelter and Schreiner, 181–97.

Over its first two years, the EHRI Document Blog established itself as an incubator of ideas about Holocaust documentation and digital methodologies, and it has the potential to continue in this role in the future. Looking forward, its authors and editors could also revisit already published articles, and enhance them with new data and visualization methods and links to new resources. Moreover, the editors will consider a more curatorial approach to the published articles. In research blogs, curation typically means selecting the best articles, for instance by promoting them to the front page. In the EHRI Document Blog, the editorial team could experiment with bringing the growing body of research data into more comprehensive presentations, for instance by combining them into a richer presentation on Holocaust sites, landscapes, and interactions in space.

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**How to quote this article:**
Michal Frankl, *"Blogging As a Research Method? The EHRI Document Blog,"* in Holocaust Archives and Research in the Digital Age, eds. Laura Brazzo, Reto Speck, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC*, n. 13 August 2018

*url:* www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=398