

REPORT

# What they Tell: Treblinka Survivor and Witness Voices in the Fortunoff Archive

By Chad Gibbs, PhD Candidate, History, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Dori Laub Fellow  
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My recent selection as the inaugural Dori Laub Fellow at the Fortunoff Video Archive has been both a tremendous honor and a great support to my ongoing research. I am a PhD candidate in History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In my dissertation, “Against that Darkness: Perseverance, Resistance, and Revolt at Treblinka,” I use survivor and witness testimonies such as those held by the Fortunoff Archive to uncover the geographic and social networks of prisoner resistance at this extermination camp.

Most are familiar with the August 2, 1943 revolt at Treblinka. In my research, I move beyond our understanding of this single-day event to explore the long roots of resistance at Treblinka and the person-to-person networks that eventually made this uprising possible. From the beginning, the search for survivor and witness testimonies has been a major component of my work.

In his 1979 volume *The Death Camp Treblinka*, Alexander Donat listed 68 survivors of the camp. Though he stated his work was far from complete, this number still dominates our understanding of Treblinka. Donat’s list, and what it says about the availability of sources for research on the camp, is something I hear almost every time I introduce the topic of my dissertation. I honestly cannot count how many times my introduction at a conference or other academic event has been followed by, “You work on Treblinka? Where can you find the sources to do that work?” My answer is always the same: oral histories.

Collections like the Fortunoff Video Archive largely came about after Donat compiled his volume. As such, they hold the recollections of many survivors who had not yet chosen to tell their stories at the time he wrote. It likely would not surprise readers here to learn that searching the

Fortunoff Archive for the term “Treblinka” does not return 68 hits. You would be correct to assume that the collection does not hold an interview for each of these known survivors. I was little short of shocked, however, when this term search produced 428 testimonies. My research was (happily) going to take a bit longer than I thought.

This enormous initial number of oral histories, of course, contains many testimonies that only mention the camp in connection with the fate of a loved one or in explanation of the interviewee’s general awareness of what Treblinka was. Even with my research in the archive ongoing, however, I now know that I have discovered many new voices of survival at Treblinka. The Fortunoff holds not only interviews with known survivors and the memories of unacknowledged escapees and revolt participants, it also contains a wealth of what I am calling Treblinka “witnesses,” or Jews who did not enter the camp but – through one twist or another – came within mere meters of doing so. Theirs and other voices from the Fortunoff provide me with the sources to change our understandings of survival at this camp and expand our view of Jewish resistance at Treblinka.

To-date, with the help of the Dori Laub Fellowship and other support, I have identified 238 survivors of Treblinka. While the story of each survivor is unique and equally important, I find that their experiences of the camp do not fit a single uncomplicated mold. Fortunoff oral histories include people who withstood months of horrid existence behind the wire, men and women who made fortuitous escapes after a mere hour on the unloading ramp, and still more individuals who endured everything in between. In my April 21, 2021 fellowship presentation, “Survival and Witnessing at Treblinka: Toward Place-Based Definitions of Holocaust Survivorship,” I will explain why my work in the Fortunoff and other collections has led me to seek specific understandings of the term “Treblinka survivor” and how a categorized view of what survival means at this camp contributes not just to our knowledge of Treblinka, but to the study of other Holocaust sites.

The experience of research in the Fortunoff Archive is much more than the sum of one’s academic questions and finds. The most powerful memories I will take away from my work in the Fortunoff are, as ever, the unexpected. My favorite example so far is the interview of Ben L. In his oral history, Ben L. tells of how he survived a period of less than one day at Treblinka before he was sent on to another camp. This was a story that had become quite familiar to me from other sources, though his later description of postwar emigration from Europe and settlement in Milwaukee, Wisconsin was a shock. For a researcher based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison working in a digital collection held in New Haven, Connecticut through – at the time – an access point in Jerusalem, Israel, the last thing I expected was a 6,000 mile return trip to Wisconsin through the voice of a newly discovered survivor.

Fascinated by his life so close to my own campus, however, I began a search of local holdings and soon discovered a second interview held by the Marquette University library. When I shared this find with our community members at the UW-Madison Mosse/Weinstein Center for Jewish Studies, a family member and alumna came forward to tell me that Ben L. was her father and that her son, Ben's grandson, is a current student at our university.

Finding second and third generation survivors of Treblinka in my own community and on my own campus was, without doubt, the furthest thing from my mind when I began to work in the Fortunoff Archive. Ben L. and his close connections to the place I call home is just one of many amazing oral histories that will stay with me well after I complete my dissertation.

I am sure that anyone who researches in the Fortunoff Archive comes away with their own stories of unexpected finds, singular voices, and perspectives forever changed by the recollections of survivors. I look forward to bringing my work on survivorship and resistance at Treblinka to the Fortunoff and wider Yale communities this April.