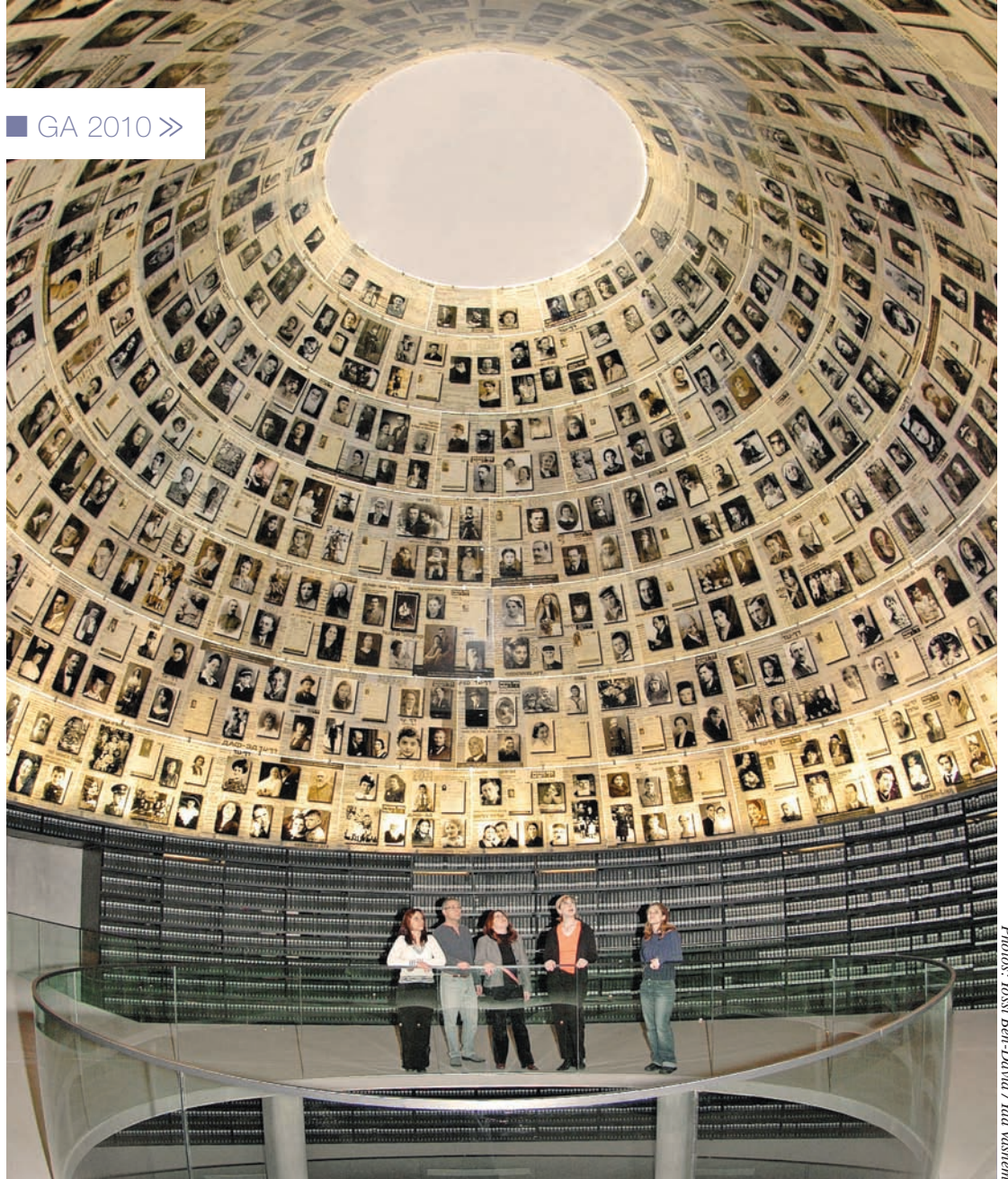


In a letter to his Hebrew teacher and mentor Uri Feivish Tauber in 1941, Eliezer Gandwenger wrote: “Memory is the only heaven from which man cannot be banished.” His words have inspired Dr. Haim Gertner, director of **Yad Vashem’s Archives Division**, to persevere with the monumental task of locating and digitizing every piece of material available about the Holocaust

/ Darryl Egnal



Photos: Yossi Ben-David / Yad Vashem

PIECES OF THE PUZZLE

Dr. Haim Gertner sleeps well at night. Although he can't deny that he takes his work home with him, he believes that the Yad Vashem Archives Division and the many people who work in it give Holocaust victims some of their dignity back. “This gives us hope,” he says. “People can dehumanize, as the Nazis did during the Holocaust, but others can give them back their humanity. And that is what we do. We are recreating life stories by linking documents and photographs through technology, knowledge and patience. Putting the pieces of the puzzle together is time-consuming and difficult work, but it is rewarding. We are giving victims the ability to speak in their own voices, even if it is a long and slow process.”

The archives were created in 1946, even before the

approval of Yad Vashem as a national institution in 1953. The first director of the Archives, Sara Friedlander, a historian from Hungary and a survivor, came to what was then mandatory Palestine after the war and brought with her both knowledge and documents that she had started to collect from people. This was the beginning of the Yad Vashem Archives.

Over the past 65 years, all types of documentation have been collected – documents belonging to the perpetrators, bystanders and the Jewish victims themselves, including photographs and testimonies. From the very beginning, written testimonies, artifacts, art collections, books and original film footage were gathered. Later, in the 1980s audio was included, and in the 1990s the testimonies started to be mainly in video format.

In the early 1990s, when the new directorate was appointed to Yad Vashem, led by Yad Vashem Chairman Avner Shalev, the process of digitization began. “We saw that the documents, audio tapes and film footage were starting to disintegrate and the photographs were gradually fading,” recalls Shalev. “Besides the vital need to preserve them, there is a major drive to give people access on a global basis. These collections are essential for grasping the scope and implications of the Holocaust and the fate of its victims, and comprise an unparalleled source of educational inspiration for our youth. Especially today, when Holocaust denial and revisionism is a real problem, it is important that the authentic pieces of history are available for anyone who is truly interested in studying about the Shoah.”

Making information accessible

Before widespread use of the Internet, people visited in person or requested information by mail. More than 10,000 people came, and still come, to the reading room of the Archives every year, and about 27,000 more applied by mail or email to get information about events or about people. But when Yad Vashem uploaded the Central Database of Holocaust Victims’ Names to the Internet at the end of 2004, millions of people started to use it. Last year, there were more than 10 million virtual visitors to the Yad Vashem website and the number increases dramatically every year. Many of them visit the Names Database, which is one of the most visited areas of the website.

“The question of accessibility is so important in our approach,” says Gertner. “In many ways, we go against the stream. Governments and other international archival organizations generally don’t allow free access to documents, especially when they are connected to the fate of individuals. Many data protection laws all over the world prevent people from being exposed to personal data. But in our case, we think that this is the way to give honor to the victims – by providing people with the opportunity to learn about them from the documents.”

Connecting the dots from one document to another, from a story to a photograph, from a name to a tax file or a sister to a brother, is how the Archives Division helps build personal stories and gives the victims of the Holocaust dignity and respect.

Destroyed memories

According to Gertner, the events of the Holocaust created what we can call a “black hole” in our communal memory and knowledge. “I’m not speaking only about the Jewish memory, but about the memory and the knowledge of humanity in general, because the Nazis didn’t destroy only the Jewish people as a people, but also the memory of their lives, the events they experienced and of the Jewish people as a society or as individuals.

“The Nazis invested so much in destroying documents, archives, knowledge and books during the occu-



Left: The Hall of Names at Yad Vashem commemorates Jews murdered in the Holocaust

Above: An original diary from the Holocaust era is painstakingly preserved at Yad Vashem’s Preservation and Restoration Laboratory

pation and the war. The ability to know what happened, who lived there, who the Jews were and what they did either died with the victims or has been spread all over the world. Still, to this day, the remnants of that knowledge are hard to find, not only because they’re widely dispersed, but also because the survivors and families of survivors understandably want to hold onto whatever they have left of those who perished,” he says.

Therefore, it is essential to do the research, to understand and connect the pieces on an ongoing basis. Many of the victims and survivors felt the need to record their experiences and the events of the Holocaust from the beginning, and to keep every piece of documentation they could find. “It was so intuitive for them that they’d already started during the war, and the survivors continued to collect pieces of evidence soon after the war,” notes Gertner.

Recording the stories

Yad Vashem houses the largest collection of Holocaust-related material in the world. There are more than 130 million documents, about 400,000 photographs and more than 100,000 testimonies in the Archives. A great deal have already been, or will be, digitized over the coming years.

But this is not all. Every year, Yad Vashem collects approximately five million documents, mainly in Europe but from all over the world, mostly from institutions and other archives. Survivors and families of survivors also continue to contribute enormously. “There are still tens of millions of documents that remain in Europe and need to be copied and brought here. It’s a slow and very demanding process,” says Gertner.

Bernard Rand was a Polish Jew who immigrated ►



Yad Vashem houses the largest collection of Holocaust-related material in the world. There are more than 130 million documents, 400,000 photographs and 100,000 testimonies – all of which are in the process of being digitized



An original diary is uploaded into Yad Vashem's computers after being preserved and digitally scanned

There are still tens of millions of documents that remain in Europe and need to be copied and brought here. It's a slow and very demanding process

For information about how you can become involved and support Yad Vashem's myriad activities: international.relations@yadvashem.org.il, www.yadvashem.org or call +972-2-6443420.

◀ to Palestine before the war. He became a British soldier in an Intelligence unit and found himself in Austria at the end of the war. He and some of his British army friends were part of the group that liberated the Mauthausen concentration camp. When they arrived, there was so much chaos and confusion that they ended up taking 14 ammunition boxes and filling them with documents they found in the offices, taking the boxes back to the UK with them.

His commander kept the boxes and, once in the UK, Rand forgot about them. In the 1980s, his commander passed away and Rand received a call from his widow who was selling their house and wanted to get rid of the boxes. He didn't know what they contained, so he took a few examples to the Israeli Embassy. They discovered that the boxes held a large part of the prisoners' cards from Mauthausen – numbering in the tens of thousands. Rand donated all of them to Yad Vashem.

Each card recorded detailed information about each prisoner, including names, dates of birth, family members, physical features and more. This information was added to the Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names. All this information helps the public and researchers piece together missing information of many Holocaust victims and survivors. And every one of them has to be preserved, protected, scanned and collated in the same way as the millions of pieces of material coming into the Archives.

The digitization process

"Accessibility is critical in our approach to the digitization process," continues Gertner. "We needed to work out how to give the public – people who are not archivists or researchers – access to all the documentation in context and with meaning. We spent many hours with our archivists, historians and computer specialists to develop a methodology that enabled us to work systemati-

cally. The digitization process is complicated and takes care and patience."

First, the raw material has to be collected. The originals then need to be preserved according to specific criteria so that they will be protected for years to come. Access cannot be given without these preservation techniques. Documents and materials are then scanned - the big step to providing accessibility, but also as a back-up.

Over the past two years, the scanning of the documents has taken on a life of its own. With the new methodology, every document, every photograph, every name is being scanned and recorded with such precision and care that the hope is that in the future it will be possible to cross reference every item.

Experienced archivists painstakingly go through every relevant document and type in key words that enable links to be made to other documents or photographs. This enables them to connect the dots to documents that help them to reconstruct the personal stories of the victims and even "reunite" them with those who survived. The cataloging software and the indexing system that was created for the digitization process can connect every detail and every document, including identity documents, tax forms from before and even during the war, prisoners' cards, letters, diaries, photographs and most importantly, names. "We are giving them back their names," says Gertner, "and with this, their faces, their dignity, their honor."

Funding the project

A new phase in the scanning and digitization of the Archives is the systematic scanning of the paper documents that began about a year ago. This project's preparatory period and first year of operation was made possible by the generous support of Dayenu Ltd., led by Colin and Gail Halpern and their family, friends of Yad Vashem and partners of the long-term vision of accessibility.

"Their donations enabled us to test the new methodology for one year – a year that ends in November. By the end of this period, 1.2 million documents will have been preserved and scanned," explains Gertner. "And the aim is to scan all documents received so far and more within the next five years, obviously depending on the financial support we receive during this time."

An additional challenge for the Archives Division is persuading survivors and families of survivors and victims to part with their cherished memories in order to have them preserved for future generations in the Archives. Although the ideal situation would be to receive the original documents so that the Yad Vashem archivists who have the expertise to preserve and protect these memories can do what they do best, people can also send the Archives scanned images.

"The difficult part is getting people to know about this mission," says Gertner. "There is still so much material out there and it is extremely important to us to get to everyone who has something to give." Gertner's hope is that – in the words of Eliezer Gandwerger – more survivors and their families will help Yad Vashem to keep the collective memory of the Jewish people from being banished from heaven forever. ■