

Storyboard Boder English

In the summer of 1946, David Boder, a psychologist of Jewish Latvian origin, conducted the very first interviews with survivors of concentration camps.

This story is about how a remarkable collection of audio-interviews recorded on steel wires in 1946 was turned into an interactive online resource in 2009.

It also illustrates the relevance of digital source criticism, in other words reflecting on how the transformation of a source from its analogue form to its digital representation on the web affects the way we conduct research.

Boder was not the only one to interview Holocaust survivors. Jewish organisations had already conducted over 15,000 interviews in Eastern Europe, but they did so by taking notes.

Boder, however, used a wire recorder to record the actual voices of his interviewees. He reacted to the very first American newsreels about the camps that portrayed the victims as a silent, anonymous mass.

Boder wanted to treat them as individuals with real names and personal stories to tell.

He set off to Europe with the mindset of a social scientist, planning to collect a representative sample of accounts on experiences in concentration camps which he could use to trace signs of trauma.

But during his journey his approach turned into that of an ethnographer: he began taking an interest in personal testimonies in their own right and in Jewish songs and ceremonies.

Upon his return to the US, Boder had visited 16 displacement camps and collected 121 interviews in 8 different languages.

The first copy he made was from carbon wire to stainless steel wire, a material strong enough to withstand the endless back and forth running of the wire that was needed to create a written transcript.

Eight of these transcripts formed the basis for his first book, "I did not interview the dead", which was published in 1948 and was an attempt to find traces of trauma in the accounts.

He continued to work on his project until his death in 1961, but 50 of his 121 recordings were never transcribed.

He found it difficult to reach out to a large public, as no publisher was willing to publish a book based on 70 transcripts of spoken language.

But thanks to reproduction technologies such as the mimeograph and the micro card, he did manage to send copies of the transcripts to a selection of libraries.

In 1998 this material was rediscovered at the Illinois Institute of Technology.

This find coincided with a growing interest in Holocaust testimonies and the advent of the first web technologies.

As a result, in 2000, 54 years after Boder's journey, his 70 transcripts and a small selection of audio recordings were digitised and published on the web.

Of course this only provided access to part of Boder's work. The restoration and curation of all 121 interviews would require a huge investment.

Eventually a pledge for this investment was made in response to the Holocaust denial of Iranian president Ahmadinejad in 2005. This led to a stronger commitment to Holocaust education in the US.

The question, however, was how best to stay true to Boder's original recordings and translations in the process of publishing them online.

Two rounds of audio restoration followed.

Meanwhile, the remaining 50 interview recordings were transcribed in their original language by native speakers, then translated into English by professional translators. This was all done in digital format.

Boder's original English translations, which had left a material trail in various libraries, were complemented online by transcriptions in the original language.

The web has brought Boder's initial vision – creating a community of listeners – to fruition. But listening to the recordings does not reveal the many transformations that the collection has undergone. This poses particular challenges to researchers:

How can they verify the origin and authenticity of digitised sources that are published on the web? They have to apply digital source criticism.

Do you want to know more about this topic? Then stay tuned for our upcoming lesson on working with the collection of David Boder.