

Giving Voice to Memory: Using Holocaust Testimonies to Enhance Public History

Oren Stier, Stephanie Brenenson, and Maryanna Ramirez

This year, first-year FIU students read *Determined* by Martin Baranek with Lisa Cicero, assigned through the Common Reading Program. In this memoir, Baranek recounts his life as a young boy in Poland and his terrifying World War II experiences in Nazi camps. To complement book and course, the Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum FIU organized *South Beach, 1977-1986: Photographs by Gary Monroe*, which depicts a now-vanished culture among Jews, many of them refugees like Baranek.

In order to enhance the exhibition and tie it more closely to the common reading, we selected and excerpted three testimonies from the USC Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive (VHA), a database of primary source testimonies of the Holocaust and other genocides, creating a 14 minute video loop that plays continuously at the entrance to the exhibition. To date 3,788 students and 3,311 community members have visited the exhibition, including 18 tours consisting of FYE and elementary students, senior groups, FIU staff, and the general public.

Locating appropriate, relevant, and compelling testimony required several steps. We identified Holocaust survivors who retired to Miami Beach, and listened to hours of testimony with the goal of finding videos that expanded on themes in the book and exhibition, including immigration, displacement, reparations, mental health, changing perceptions on the meaning of survival, and the importance of recording testimonials of people who have witnessed first-hand genocide and war.

By linking three diverse mediums, we enhanced both the photographic and written portraits of postwar Jewish life and engaged the public in first-person accounts of survival and immigration. The slice of history we compiled brought to life traditions and emotions that are relevant for anyone living in our complex, global world.