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The European Holocaust Research Infrastructure in the Czech Republic

Abstract

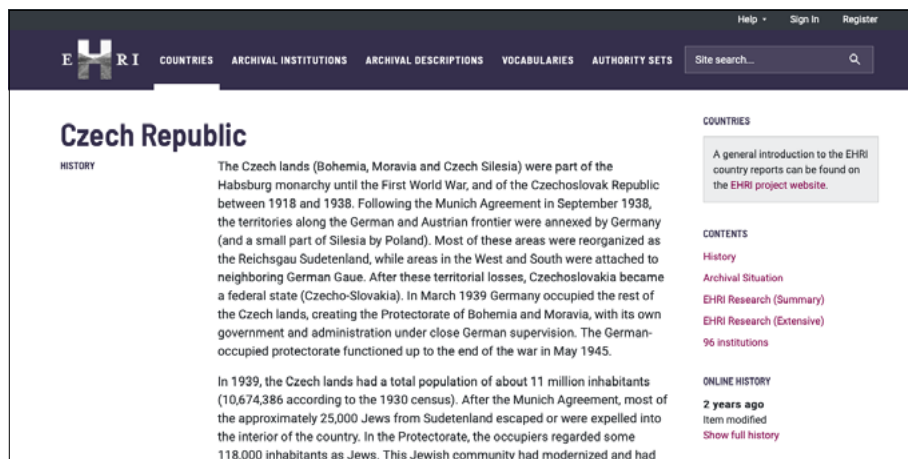
This report is dedicated to the activities and results of the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure project (EHRI), which are related to the history of Jews from the Bohemian lands and the Holocaust. It illustrates both the strategic goals as well as the challenges of EHRI. The report focusses on four major areas: the EHRI project generally and the EHRI Portal, the Terezín Research Guide, the EHRI digital editions of documents, and the EHRI Document Blog. It demonstrates how the EHRI project strongly supports the Holocaust research community and provides researchers with new opportunities to engage with the wider scholarly community. As a transnational project, EHRI connects archival collections across the borders of states, institutions, and languages.

By introducing a number of activities and results of the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure project (EHRI) related to the history of the Holocaust in the Bohemian lands, this report contributes to the ongoing debate on how to best document and make available Holocaust-related sources. It illustrates both the strategic goals as well as the challenges of EHRI. While most resources and organisational structures are available only on the national level, EHRI acts as a transnational project, connecting archival collections across the borders of states, institutions, and languages.

Launched in 2010, EHRI is a European Union-funded consortium of archives and research institutions that aims to improve access to Holocaust-related archival materials. The EHRI team aims to support the Holocaust research community by creating a digital infrastructure and supporting communities of researchers. The project builds upon the innovative use of digital humanities and enables new methodological approaches to Holocaust research. Over twenty institutions from the field of Holocaust studies and digital humanities in Europe as well as in Israel and the United States were and continue to be involved in the project. So far, three institutions in the Czech Republic have participated in the project: the Jewish Museum in Prague, the Terezín Memorial, and the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

Holocaust-related archival material tends to be fragmented and scattered all over the world, making access complicated, if not impossible, as well as very time-consuming. EHRI's ambition was to overcome part of this problem by providing online access to information on dispersed sources related to the Holocaust through its online portal.¹ This currently displays information on over 2,200 archives in 59 countries that hold Holocaust-related collections and contains more than 325,000 archival descriptions from over 763 institutions. The information in the portal is continuously updated with new collection descriptions.

¹ <http://portal.ehri-project.eu/> (4 July 2021).



EHRI Portal, the country report for the Czech Republic.

The portal also includes a number of relevant descriptions and sources related to the Holocaust in the Bohemian lands. Users can use the country report for the Czech Republic as a starting point, which provides a short history of the Holocaust in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, a brief description of the local archival system, and an overview of the EHRI methodology of surveying in the country. Currently, 96 Czech archives holding Holocaust-related materials are listed, including city and state archives as well as non-governmental institutions.² To survey collections in regional and district archives, the Czech EHRI partnered with the Yerusha project, which focusses on collections related to Jewish history and shared expertise, contacts, and resources.³

However, to support research on the Holocaust in the territory of the Czech Republic, especially within a transnational effort like EHRI, it is not sufficient to stay within the borders of the country and to only traverse its archival structure. Due to the fragmentation of the documentary record and post-war documentation projects as well as the migration of survivors, highly significant sources can also be found in archives in other countries, for instance in Yad Vashem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

In the post-war period, some sources relating to the Holocaust in the Bohemian lands were divided and became part of collections safeguarded outside of Czechoslovakia. This is illustrated for example by the materials collected in the framework of the so called Dokumentační akce (Documentation Campaign), an early post-war project in which Holocaust survivors from the Bohemian lands hastily collected documents, testimonies, as well as artworks. Zeev Scheck, the leading figure behind this initiative, emigrated from Czechoslovakia to Palestine in 1946 and brought a portion of the documents and testimonies with him, which he handed over first to the Central Zionist Archives and then to the Jewish Historical Archives (today known as the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People). In 1976, Scheck's sources were transferred to Yad Vashem. Fragments of the material also found their way to the Beit Theresienstadt memorial, museum, and archives in Givat Haim, which Scheck had helped to create. An agreement was reached whereby copies of some materials and documents with a clear relationship to Czechoslovakia remained in the country and were stored in the archives of the Jewish Museum in

² See: <http://portal.ehri-project.eu/countries/cz> (4 July 2021).

³ <https://yerusha.eu/> (4 July 2021).

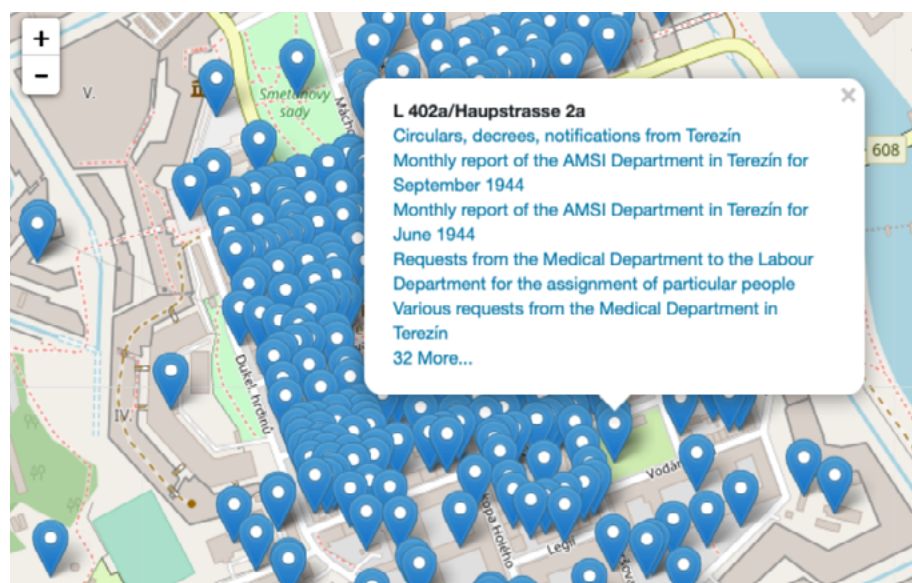
Prague. In such cases, the EHRI Portal is an easily accessible tool that helps to overcome a core problem, namely the fragmented and dispersed nature of the research materials.

Within the EHRI project, the gaps in documentation related to the Holocaust in the Bohemian lands and the fragmentation of this documentation catalysed a number of new and experimental approaches. These will be demonstrated in the following through the examples of the Terezín Research Guide, the EHRI online editions of documents, and the EHRI Document Blog.

Terezín Research Guide

The Terezín Research Guide is one of the early results of the project, which relates to the topic of Holocaust-relevant sources from the Bohemian lands and aims to provide at least a partial answer to the difficult archival situation described above.⁴ Its main goal is to create a comprehensive, innovative, and user-friendly guide through the dispersed and fragmented archival material of the Theresienstadt (Terezín) Ghetto and to enable further research on the history of the ghetto.

The EHRI team connected collections spread throughout different archival institutions, resulting in a combination of data from the four main archives containing materials on Theresienstadt: the Yad Vashem Archives, the Terezín Memorial, the Beit Theresienstadt, and the Jewish Museum in Prague. The EHRI research guide demonstrates what a collaborative archival project can achieve and how archivists can redefine their tasks beyond providing physical access and creating finding aids restricted to the local collections. The guide does not aim to make the existing archives irrelevant by placing all the information online, but rather to help researchers identify relevant sources and to connect and compare them to documents in other collections. The partners provided the relevant data, which were linked using controlled vocabularies and authority sets. The data can be approached through full-text searches or faceted browsing, that is, searching by keyword, place, or organisation.



Terezín Research Guide.

⁴ <http://portal.ehri-project.eu/guides/terezin> (4 July 2021).

Searching by name is also possible thanks to the implementation of the databases of Terezín prisoners,⁵ which is also available online at the holocaust.cz portal and is curated by the Terezín Initiative Institute.

Researchers can also approach the data via a map of Theresienstadt that connects archival material from the different archival institutions and directly links to the archival descriptions in the EHRI database.⁶ The thematic guide, an experimental construction of the EHRI team, is closest to traditional archival finding aids. It structures the descriptions according to the main subjects related to Theresienstadt history and allows the users to traverse the hierarchy of most important keywords used to describe the Theresienstadt-related archives. The guide is intended not only for scholars, but also for the wider public interested in this topic. For this reason, further contextualisation is provided by a historical introduction, a timeline, as well as other texts.

During the preparatory phase and due to their constructivist approach to archival data, the EHRI team had to face various challenges. The preparation of the Terezín Research Guide demonstrated that metadata formats as well as ways of capturing these differ heavily between countries and institutions. To overcome these differences, EHRI analysed the information provided and created mappings between the different sets of metadata of the partners, an effort which turned out to be highly labour-intensive.

EHRI Online Editions

EHRI has also developed tools and a platform for the publication of online editions, which facilitates the preparation and publication of documentary editions using EHRI data (such as collection descriptions and controlled vocabularies) for annotation and data enrichment. While the first published editions were prepared by the EHRI team, the platform will in future offer an opportunity for other projects and researchers for their own edition publication purposes.

The first edition of documents, entitled *BeGrenzte Flucht. Die österreichischen Flüchtlinge an der Grenze zur Tschechoslowakei im Krisenjahr 1938*, was published on the EHRI platform in 2018.⁷ It makes available a set of more than 100 documents relating to the fate and experience of Austrian refugees who attempted to escape to Czechoslovakia after the 'Anschluß' of Austria to Nazi Germany in March 1938. The edition documents the persecution and expulsion of mostly Jewish Austrians and the restrictive Czechoslovak policy which resulted in the border being closed to these refugees. The edition not only fills a gap in the documentation of the flight and exile of Austrians after the 'Anschluß', but also broadens research on refugees and state refugee policies during the Holocaust more generally. It also combines fragmented archival sources from several countries, including the Czech Republic, Austria, the UK and the USA.

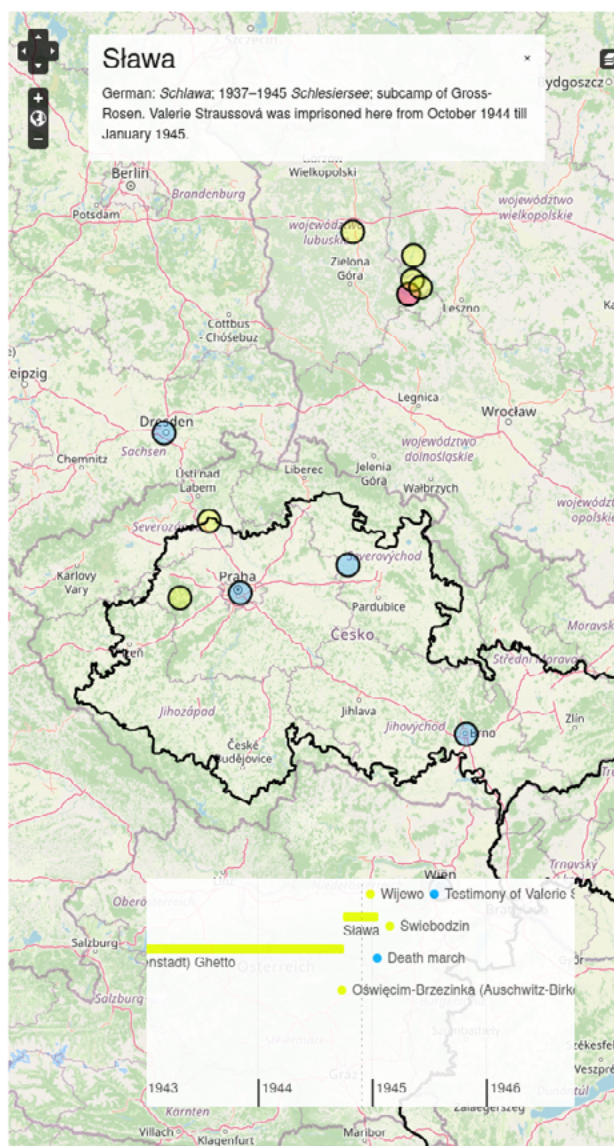
The *Early Holocaust Testimony* edition brings together, for the first time, samples of testimonies of Jewish witnesses and survivors taken before the 1960s.⁸ It includes over ninety early Holocaust testimonies related to the persecution, fate, and experiences of Jews from various European countries. For decades, these significant

5 http://portal.ehri-project.eu/guides/terezin/prisoner_databases (4 July 2021).

6 <http://portal.ehri-project.eu/guides/terezin/geography> (4 July 2021).

7 <http://begrenzte-flucht.ehri-project.eu/> (4 July 2021).

8 <https://early-testimony.ehri-project.eu/> (4 July 2021).

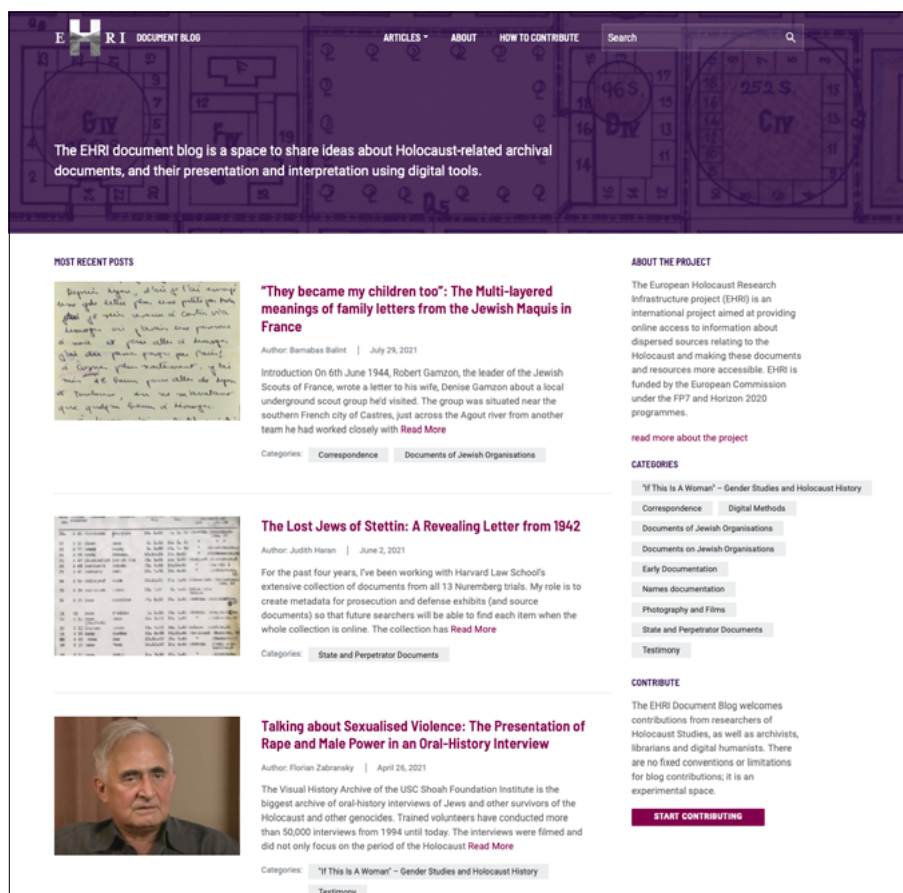


Example of an interactive visualization from the EHRI Edition of Early Holocaust Testimony projecting the text onto a map.

one hour, our journey took twenty-four hours, after which we came to the station of **Auschwitz**. There, we had to get off, without our luggage, and the selection process began directly in front of the train: women with children and elderly people went to the right, we, the childless, to the left. At the time, we didn't know what it meant to be sent to the right (gas chamber). We were taken to the shower room, where all of the clothes we wore were taken away from us, our heads were shaved, we were taken under the showers, and dressed in old rags. Then, the soul destroying life of the concentration camp, which we were already familiar with, began. Five days later, we underwent a new selection process and were taken to a train. We received better rags and were sent to forced labor to Germany. We were taken to the **Schlesiensee** station in north-east Silesia, near the Polish border. We walked from the station for two hours and were placed in two farms, 1,000 women in each. We stayed in two huge barns full of straw. The next morning, we were given shovels and spades and we had to dig trenches that were 3.5 meters deep. For us women it was very hard labor. We received very little food, and so we shortly lost a lot of weight. At the end of October, one of the girls ran over my foot with a wheelbarrow while we were working. I had a tiny scrape and didn't pay any attention to it. After a few days, my foot started to ache. It became swollen, and I got a small phlegmon. It got worse and the doctor had to perform an operation in the barn. Afterwards, my fever dropped, but I couldn't stand on the foot at all and for the next three weeks I had to crawl around on all fours. Once I felt a bit better, I had to perform domestic chores. I peeled potatoes. I got up at 4 AM and all day long until the evening I had to peel potatoes. Two days later, I got a fever of 40 degrees. I felt a huge pricking on the right side of my chest, and I started coughing. The doctor told me that I had pneumonia. Due to the fact that it was impossible to apply

sources were rarely used and neglected. One of the main goals in this project was to make the materials more accessible not only to scholars, but also to students and the wider public. The edition therefore provides an English translation of each testimony alongside transcripts in the original languages, which include Hungarian, Polish, Czech, German, Dutch, and French. This is as an open-ended and ongoing project. At the time of this writing, the editorial team is working on a set of over thirty testimonies in Yiddish, which will later be included in the edition. Twenty testimonies are included from the Czech sources, which were mostly gathered within the so-called Dokumentační akce (Documentation Campaign). The content of these testimonies is usually very brief in character, structured as court testimonies that focus on facts and the identification of perpetrators.

The EHRI approach to digital editions emphasises the linked data pattern, using links to established controlled vocabularies (EHRI for Holocaust-related entities; GeoNames for geographic information). Documents published in the EHRI Digital Edition of early Holocaust testimonies were encoded in the Text Encoding Initiative



EHRI Document Blog.

(TEI) standard, a widely adopted format for digital editions. Despite various existing approaches to the publication of TEI documents online, no available solution fitted the requirements of EHRI digital editions. The team therefore opted to develop its own set of tools as well as a front-end platform based on a simple but powerful existing open source software, Omeka. Where location information is available with geographic coordinates, an automatically generated interactive map is displayed, created through the Omeka Neatline plugin. The full-screen version, which users can access through a link, provides text from the documents alongside the map, allowing for the narrative of the document to be followed in space.

EHRI Document Blog

The EHRI Document Blog was launched in 2016, with sixty blog posts having been published to date.⁹ This is a space in which authors, including early career scholars, can showcase their research focussing on Holocaust-related documents, share their ideas, and experiment with new types of presentations and interpretations using digital tools. This platform supports the sharing of new methods of storytelling and of different types of digitally supported visualisations.¹⁰

⁹ Judith Haran, *The Lost Jews of Stettin. A Revealing Letter from 1942*, available online: <https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2021/06/02/the-lost-jews-of-stettin/> (4 July 2021).

¹⁰ Michal Frankl, *Blogging as a Research Method? The EHRI Document Blog*, in: *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History* 13 (2018), 24-51.

The EHRI Document Blog welcomes contributions from researchers of Holocaust studies as well as archivists, librarians, and digital humanities scholars. There are no fixed conventions or limitations for blog contributions. The blog combines narrative descriptions with document metadata and references to relevant collection descriptions within the EHRI Portal. Contributors are assisted by a member of the Document Blog team, who guides them through the entire process of creating a blog contribution. All types of materials, including textual documents, photos, audio-visual materials, and testimonies, can be discussed in the EHRI Document Blog. These typically start with an individual document, a collection, or a type of document, with the contributions then presenting ongoing research and posing questions pertaining to archival history and interpretation.

Articles discussing documents about the Bohemian lands also contributed to the development of the EHRI Document Blog. The film historian Eva Strusková, for instance, uncovered the complex history of film footage from the Theresienstadt Ghetto. Her contribution demonstrates how to analyse fragmented film material through an example in which the identity of a hitherto anonymous girl in the 1942 film shot was uncovered.¹¹ An article by Wolfgang Schellenbacher focusses on examples of correspondence from and to Hans Frank, a young Czech Jewish man who fled from the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia to Denmark. Between 1940 and 1943, the letters and postcards were sent from or to his family in Prague and later to the Łódź Ghetto as well as to fellow refugees in Denmark or to friends who fled to other countries. The correspondence gives insights into the daily life of a young person in exile and shows the growing contrast between the life of Jews in occupied countries and in the free world. Neatline map presentations enables the concurrent spatial reading and understanding of the published archival sources.¹²

Conclusion

Historian Wolf Gruner noted that the history of the Holocaust in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia is only marginally reflected in histories of the Holocaust.¹³ However, within the EHRI project, Czech partner organisations as well as materials about the multilingual Bohemian lands provided a new impetus for transnational and digital archival documentation. The EHRI Document Blog became a dynamic, research-driven online environment where scholars as well as the wider public can share their research ideas and experiment with new digital tools and various visualisation methods. The Terezín Research Guide bridges the fragmented and dispersed archival materials of the Theresienstadt Ghetto. It combines data from four archival institutions in the Czech Republic and Israel. EHRI digital editions such as *BeGrenzte Flucht* connect historical documents to EHRI's structured data sources such as collection descriptions and controlled vocabularies. In so doing, as the *Early Holocaust Testimony* edition demonstrated, they leverage the knowledge gathered by EHRI to connect dispersed and fragmented multilingual archival collections.

11 Eva Strusková, Lotte Porges. The Story Behind the Photograph, available online: <http://blog.ehri-project.eu/2018/05/08/lotte-porges/> (4 July 2021).

12 Wolfgang Schellenbacher, Hans Frank. Letters from Exile, available online: <https://blog.ehri-project.eu/2016/04/04/hans-frank-letters-from-exile/> (4 July 2021).

13 Wolf Gruner, *The Holocaust in Bohemia and Moravia. Czech Initiatives, German Policies, Jewish Responses*. Translated by Alex Skinner. New York/Oxford 2019, 1-8.

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