

YadPOT: An Aid to Creating Pages of Testimony

by Moishe Miller

In its Hall of Names, Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, has documented half of all Holocaust victims, three million of them. Another three million, the second half, remain unmemorialized. Former chief archivist, Yaacov Lozowick, noted some years ago that all major lists of victims probably have been located and utilized by now. Any substantial number of new names, Lozowick predicted, probably only can come from Jewish genealogists whose research has uncovered many names of family victims. Also true, however, is the fact that many genealogists have not yet submitted individual Pages of Testimony (POTs or Pages) for their families' victims, often (and ironically) because the number of names to record is so large that the task seems overwhelming and daunting.

This author, a computer programmer, faced with exactly such a situation, has solved his problem by designing software—offered free of charge to the Jewish genealogical community—that will automatically generate individual Pages that may be sent online directly to Yad Vashem's Hall of Names. The process is described below. Although a number of software products are discussed, the author has no financial interest in any and no endorsements are made or implied.

Background

Yad Vashem exists to commemorate the six million Jews murdered by the Germans and their collaborators, as well as the numerous Jewish communities destroyed during the Holocaust, so that they will have an eternal remembrance. Since 1955, Yad Vashem has worked to fulfill its mandate to preserve the memory of the Jews who perished in the Holocaust by collecting their names. One of the central means in accomplishing this task is the Page of Testimony (POT).

Pages of Testimony are designed to restore the personal identity and brief life stories of each individual victim, which the Germans and their accomplices tried so hard to obliterate. Submitted by survivors, relatives, or friends, Pages list the victims' names, biographical details, and, when available, photographs of the victims. They are preserved in the Hall of Names in Yad Vashem's Holocaust History Museum complex.

Computerization of the Pages of Testimony collection commenced in 1992 and has evolved since then into the Central Database of Shoah Victims' Names, which contains additional names identified from various archival sources. In November 2004, the entire Names Database was uploaded to the Yad Vashem website at www.yadvashem.org, where one can freely access information on the more than three million Jewish victims identified to date as well as submit additional names and information online.

Jewish Genealogists

Jewish genealogists are an important, and mostly un-

tapped, resource for many of these names. The challenge to date has been the time and resources necessary to create a Page of Testimony. Although creating one page is relatively simple, transcribing tens or perhaps hundreds of pages from genealogical software and paper records has proven to be a barrier to many genealogists.

In the December 12, 2004, edition of "Nu? What's New?" the e-zine of Jewish Genealogy, editor Gary Mokotoff noted, "Over the years, I have submitted 82 Pages of Testimony, but there are now nearly 300 Holocaust victims on my family tree. A check of the Shoah Victims' Names Database demonstrated that very few of the persons I have not submitted have Pages of Testimony. I have a data entry task to do over the next few months." Mokotoff admits he has yet to submit the additional names because of the time involved.

Existing Software Options

Today resources exist to facilitate the completion of Pages of Testimony. Genealogists can obtain a copy of DoroTree from Jerusalem software maker DoroTree Technologies Ltd. With DoroTree's type-in adapted forms, a genealogist can type in the information on his/her personal computer, print out the completed forms, sign them and send them to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem. These forms currently exist in English and in Hebrew.

Alternative software has been created by Incline Software in South Jordan, Utah, producer of Ancestral Quest. In 2001, Incline Software released a "Jewish Edition" of Ancestral Quest version 3.0 that included a "Page of Testimony" feature. Ancestral Quest no longer has a Jewish Edition; instead, the standard edition of Ancestral Quest simply provides these features.

While these two software products enable some level of automation in the creation of Pages of Testimony, neither is a good solution for most genealogists. More than 50 items of data must be incorporated into each Page, and addressing them is a significant task when dealing with a large number of POTs. Moreover, many genealogists do not use DoroTree or Ancestral Quest and may not want, or be able, to migrate to a software product other than one they already use.

Early Development Efforts

In 2004, the author presented Alex Avraham, director of Yad Vashem's Hall of Names, with an idea for the extraction of Pages of Testimony directly from existing proprietary software products that do not offer POT support for creating Pages. The focus was Family Tree Maker (FTM), one of the most popular software products on the market. Avraham indicated strong interest in the idea.

The author, a computer programmer and amateur genealogist, together with Gregory Chernomaz, another computer programmer, developed a plan to automate the crea-

tion of Pages of Testimony. They named the project YadPOT. *Yad*, Hebrew for hand or handle, represents the hand or assistance being offered. Obviously, *Yad* also represents *Yad Vashem* itself, and *POT* is the common abbreviation for Pages of Testimony.

The software developers determined that to be successful, the tool they were creating would need to perform two tasks:

- Understand the data stored in most genealogy programs
- Produce Pages of Testimony, based on that data, for those who perished in the Holocaust.

For the first task, they contacted Wholly Genes, maker of the utility Genbridge. Genbridge has the ability to read (i.e., understand) almost all genealogy files. The company donated the software for use with YadPOT. For the second task, automatic creation of form-based PDF files, the pair approached California-based activePDF Inc. The company donated a copy of its activePDF Toolkit, which allowed YadPOT to create a PDF file with data extracted in the Genbridge process.

The YadPOT developers had hoped that the web could be the delivery system for the product. Needing to be certain that only genuine Pages of Testimony would be submitted, they thought of JewishGen. JewishGen, which is a password-protected site used extensively by the Jewish genealogical community, seemed an ideal vehicle. Unfortunately, when approached with the concept in December of 2004, JewishGen lacked the resources and/or time to commit to the project. Lacking an entity to host the web portal and a means to validate the submitter as legitimate, the project seemed doomed.

Further Development Efforts

The author, who had more than 1,700 unmemorialized Holocaust victims on his family tree, knew that he would never manually create Pages of Testimony for them. Not wanting the project to end, the two programmers implemented the pieces they had developed as a Windows-based product. By early 2005, they had a working prototype and approached *Yad Vashem* once again. In January 2005, Alex Avraham met with the author to discuss the project outline. They determined that a process to automate the creation of Pages of Testimony on a large scale must be able to do the following:

- Create a Page of Testimony, including submitter's information and signature.
- Generate Microsoft Excel spreadsheets detailing the various facets of the data in the forms, in three separate reports: an overview report, a detail report, and a picture report.
- Create a DVD of all the original photographs submitted in the Pages of Testimony and cross-referenced via the picture report.

The two programmers set to work implementing the enhanced specifications, but a number of personal obstacles prevented them from completing the project at that time.

Proposed Standards

It was not until 2008 that Gary Mokotoff proposed standards for data entry (see: www.iiig.org/Standards/DataEntry.aspx and AVOTAYNU, Vol. XXIV, No. 3, Fall 2008, pp. 3–6). In 2005, no standard had yet been proposed to identify a Holocaust victim in a genealogical database. The focus of the YadPOT team in 2005 was to standardize some of the ways that data could be stored in a genealogical database. This was a necessary step that would enable YadPOT to be used on other researchers' databases.

The Jewish genealogical community has not adopted standards to record Holocaust victims in genealogy software, and when an informal survey of some amateur genealogists revealed that they used similar conventions, the programmers decided to adopt them.

The next section will interest the technical reader; others may pick up the story with the subsequent section.

Some Technical Considerations

Assumed standards of data entry were implemented in YadPOT for Holocaust victims, Names (first, nickname, surname, etc.), Dates, Place of Residence, Pictures, and other data related to populating a Page of Testimony. This standard leverages the database's ability to document facts using a named fact and a value. This is called a "fact field," for instance, Residence=Brooklyn. In this example, Residence is the named fact and is also known as a fact field. *Brooklyn* is the value of that fact field.

- The fact that someone was a Holocaust victim is recorded as *PIH* (for "*perished in the Holocaust*") in the Died or Place of Death field in the genealogy database.

- As an alternative, a fact field entitled *PIH* with a value of *Y* also indicates that a person perished in the Holocaust.

- In the Notes field, the entries "*Holocaust victim*," or "*Perished in Holocaust*," or "*PIH*" similarly indicated a Holocaust victim. A dynamic check also was added so any one data field and data value pair could be added to the program's check during runtime. Currently, these are the options that YadPOT utilizes for determining if an entry warrants creation of a POT.

The handling of names was another process in need of standards. A person potentially can have a title, a given legal or civil name, a nickname, a Hebrew name, a Yiddish name, a surname or family name, and a maiden name. In addition, the Hebrew name might be stored in English or in Hebrew in a genealogy software program. YadPOT recognizes and captures all of these permutations. The standard we adopted for names was based on the author's entries in Family Tree Maker. A Genbridge function retrieves the name, including the notation, "This person is also known as (AKA)." To permit a bilingual approach to names, the Hebrew font Ahroni was chosen. YadPOT also uses the fact fields of Hebrew Name and Hebrew Name in Ahroni. As seen in the sample output, YadPOT can populate the POT with both Hebrew and English in the same name box on the POT. The order of the population is given name, followed by

any nickname in parentheses, and any Hebrew name in the lower right hand of the name box on the POT. This standard is used for all names: victim, spouse, father, and mother. Children are not listed on the latest version of the POT form.

Dates are handled in two ways. Aside from extracting the standard date, the program also checks to see if data for *yahrzeit* (anniversary of date of death) is present in a fact field. If so, the *yahrzeit* is appended to the date. As an example, "1 AUG1942 - MENACHEM AV 18" would be produced on the Page of Testimony if a researcher recorded both dates in the genealogy database.

The field Permanent Residence on the Page of Testimony was extracted only from the fact field "Residence." There are fact fields Street1, Street2, City, and whatever other address data the GenBridge process of YadPOT is able to extract from the specific genealogy database being used. This data then was merged into the Page of Testimony box entitled Address. The ability for Genbridge to retrieve the address information is dependent on what genealogical software is used. (This feature may be available only on GEDCOM, Family Tree Maker, and Legacy software files.)

Photographs

Researchers have two options for dealing with digital photographs related to their genealogy: store the picture somewhere in their computer (in which case the picture is not part of the genealogy database) or store/embed it in the genealogy database together with all the other data. YadPOT accommodates both scenarios by inserting the image onto the Page of Testimony. For a photograph not stored as part of the database, a piece of meta-data is required. Meta-data is data about data. In other words, the researcher needs to keep all the images in a single computer directory and also record in the genealogy database the name of the actual image in that directory. For external photograph files, the fact field of Picture was used to record the filename of the photograph and insert it into the Page of Testimony. PictureCaption was used to insert a caption into the Page above the photograph. Using the activePDF Toolkit, YadPOT can insert TIF and JPG images. (Other formats are accepted without a guarantee of success.)

YadPOT can retrieve image objects embedded in the genealogy database. YadPOT searches for the first or main image, in cases where more than one object is associated with an individual. (For the even more technical reader: It checks for a primary exhibit that is an image. If no image is marked as primary, then all other objects associated with the victim are parsed for an image.) If an image is found, it is extracted and added to the POT along with the associated caption. The image is also copied and saved to the filename directory specified in the main YadPOT screen.

Other Considerations

YadPOT also uses a fact field called Occupation. FamilyStatus is another necessary standard and fact field for YadPOT. Not every victim without a spouse or child

was unmarried, in fact, "single." This fact field allows genealogists to record the victim as single for use in the creation of a Page of Testimony. By adding this new fact field to a genealogy database with the appropriate value, this information can be extracted by YadPOT for use in populating the Page of Testimony.

YadPOT also gathers Submitter Information to insert into the bottom section of the Page of Testimony form. Included in the information solicited is an e-mail address, which is added at the end of the form to facilitate future researchers' direct contact with submitters. Those who often change e-mail addresses probably will not use this option. A JewishGen user number also is solicited to enable continuity in case of e-mail change, though the field currently has no function. As part of the POT, Yad Vashem requires that the submitter needs to sign the form. For a researcher, with an abundance of names and more than 1,700 forms generated, this would be a big undertaking. YadPOT offers assistance here as well. The researcher may provide a scanned or faxed signature, and YadPOT can use that image and insert that image as the signature on each form.

Fast Forward to 2009

The author published a family history book in 2003 and assisted with a second edition in 2007. In 2003, he pledged to one of the book's sponsors that, at the completion of the project, he would submit Pages of Testimony for all the family members who had perished in the Holocaust. In January 2009, he finally fulfilled his pledge and presented Alex Avraham with a DVD with 1,743 signed Pages of Testimony from his personal family research. All the Pages were produced automatically with the YadPOT program. The process took 10 minutes to create the output, which amounted to 468 megabytes of data. One hundred twenty of the Pages of Testimony had embedded photographs. Miller also delivered all three data reports and a separate directory of the original photographs.

How to Submit

The YadPOT developers now invite genealogists willing to participate in the next phase of testing. Help us to help you. Create all your Pages of Testimony by sending your data to www.yadpot.org. Are there privacy concerns? What about opportunity for misuse? There will always be questions. But now there are no more excuses. As a community, we can supply the missing three million names. Be a part of it.

Moishe Miller's genealogy research focuses on the Langsam family that originated in Galicia. His family website is www.langsam.com. Miller has published a 370-page hard-cover family history of his wife's Koschitzki ancestry. He also has a 10' x 4' ancestry chart on parchment that comprises ten generations, records 51 of his children's 64 g-g-g-grandparents and hangs in his Succah. Inquiries about the YadPOT project should be directed to info@yadpot.org.