Who Shall Judge My Work? David P. Boder's 1946 interviews of Holocaust survivors

This article is based on the author's presentation at the 2013 ARSC Conference in Kansas City.

In the summer of 1946, psychology professor David P. Boder (1886-1961) of the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) visited various displaced persons' camps in Western Europe to record the testimonies of Jews who had survived the Holocaust. For this purpose he brought along a wire recorder, a relatively-new invention of IIT's Armour Research Foundation. Over the course of the summer, Boder fulfilled his mission, interviewing over 120 survivors and nearly exhausting his supply of wire spools. Back in the U.S., Boder spent most of his remaining fifteen years translating and transcribing these interviews, for as wide a dissemination as he could manage given the resources and technologies available in that era.

Those are the simple facts – or, rather, the simplest facts one can posit about a story that began in complexity and which will continue to challenge humanity in its eternal quest to capture and communicate truth through the varied disciples of documentation and history. Certainly, the historical factuality of the Holocaust is accepted by the vast majority of those today who possess enough intellect, information, open-mindedness, and empathy. Unfortunately, there are also those who dispute the basic facts of this calamity – and, given that fact, the process of education cannot rest. In the late 1990s, IIT's Galvin Library created the first version of its "Voices of the Holocaust" web site, which provided Boder's English translations as well as audio clips from the minority of interviews that had been conducted in English. Such an initial effort, though limited, was a worthy endeavor. Participating staff members were called upon to re-type Boder's 1950s transcripts for web use and many were profoundly moved by what they read.

Then, in December 2005, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad labeled the Holocaust a "myth." IIT Dean of Libraries Christopher Stewart then committed personnel and financial resources so that the remaining audio files could be posted to the site, along with transcriptions and translations that Boder had not been able to complete during his life. The vastly-improved and augmented website went live at the end of 2009. Given my "two hats" (an archival career coupled with a PhD. in modern European history) I was privileged to be a member of the core team that laid the groundwork for the new website in 2007-2009. However, my exceptionally-gifted colleague, Eben English, Galvin Library's then-Digital Services Librarian, logged many more hours on the project than I while supervising a battery of students and translators both on-site and remotely (some as far removed as Germany).

Figure 1. *David P. Boder.*

In the process of preparing the new website, I of course learned more about the Holocaust and Boder's career – and also about the changing usages of audio-recorded interviews since the 1940s. Those evolving usages have been determined by 1) changing goals and methodologies both in the media and in the social sciences; and, 2) by the changing technologies that have been available to those disciplines. In the remainder of this essay I will cover key elements of the larger narrative (the Holocaust and Boder's role in documenting it) but will also offer some thoughts and observations on the evolution of what is now commonly known as audio-recorded "oral history."

The Man Who Sat Behind the Microphone

It is important to know something about the man who sat behind the microphone: David P. Boder. Born in Lithuania in 1886 (when still a part of the Russian Empire), Boder was born Aron Mendel Michelsen in Libau (now Liepaja, Latvia), where his father worked in the Russian civil service. Right from birth, Boder straddled different worlds. Being Jewish in a deeply anti-Semitic empire presented the greatest potential challenge. But other cultural forces swirled around him as well. Russian was spoken in the classroom, but Boder's community normally used Yiddish or German.

In furtherance of his education, Boder (a name he did not assume until the 1920s) began a series of travels and relocations that took him to Vilna (now Lithuania); Leipzig, Germany; and New York in the summer of 1906. Not only did these travels add to his linguistic repertoire, but they (particularly in Germany) also introduced him to the new discipline of psychology and to techniques of laboratory experimentation. Returning to the Russian empire, he completed his studies at St. Petersburg's Psychoneurological Institute. Inquisitive as well as personally broad-minded, Boder's studies centered on the nexus between materiality (environmental and physiological causations) and humanity (how these were translated into meaningful human experiences). Also, then back in Russia after 1906, Boder made a commitment to family life by marrying in 1907 and fathering his only child, Elena. He thereafter settled into several years as a gymnasium instructor.

The First World War and Russia's subsequent revolution of course had major impacts on Boder's life. Given his professional credentials, he was given some authority in an engineering army battalion. By the 1917 revolution he was in Omsk, Siberia. He became associated with a provincial wing of the Bolshevik movement – one not tightly controlled by Lenin – but evidently did not see a secure future for himself or his family in Russia. For in 1919 he travelled east with Elena and his second wife (having divorced the first many years before) through a Japanese zone of occupation – with Mexico as their destination in the New World. There, his second wife soon died, and where he remarried again in 1925 while lecturing in the National University in Mexico City. It was during his years in Mexico that Boder assumed the name David Pablo Boder, for reasons unknown to posterity. David might have been adopted in honor of the great Israelite king; Pablo was obviously influenced by the Latin American stay; but the roots of Boder are even more questionable than those for the other names. By the time Boder entered the U.S. in the mid-1920s, he was conversant in roughly a dozen languages.

In the U.S., Boder quickly found a position for himself in the psychology department of Chicago's Lewis Institute. He also finished his graduate education at the University of Chicago and at Northwestern University, concluding with the PhD. The 1930s found him

Figure 2. *In addition to his interviews, Boder also used the wire recorder to capture public meetings and performances by DP groups, several of which were held outdoors.*

busily teaching at Lewis Institute, travelling to international conferences on psychology, and founding a Psychology Museum in Chicago. In 1940, Lewis Institute merged with the Armour Institute to create the new Illinois Institute of Technology, and Boder relocated to a new campus.

At the end of World War II in 1945, Boder was eager to return to Europe to conduct interviews among the displaced persons there (particularly those of Jewish heritage), to assist him in developing what he called a "traumatalogical index." This index sought to quantify the intensities of trauma that had been experienced by these survivors – obviously in service of a clinical and social scientific model. He put together a standardized questionnaire for his interviews so that the individual results could be best utilized for his model. He also planned on taking with him a wire recorder that had been invented at IIT so that he could record not only testimony but also vocal evidence of trauma – and then analyze/quantify that evidence at leisure back in the U.S.

The rest of 1945 and much of early 1946 were consumed by Boder's efforts to obtain the various governmental permissions and financial resources necessary for a several-months stay overseas. Boder finally arrived in Paris in late July 1946 and worked at a frenetic pace until his return to the U.S. in early October. He recorded over ninety hours of testimony (using all two hundred spools of wire he had brought with him) at sixteen sites while conducting over 120 separate interviews.

From Social Scientist to Documentarian

Once Boder was in the field his focus and purpose clearly shifted – from that of a social scientist to that of a documentarian. As he listened to survivor's testimonies, he became caught up in their stories. He eased off his scripted questions and allowed his interviewees to tell their stories without major interruptions. Initially he had positioned his interviewees so that they had their backs to him and the wire recorder; all the better to preserve objectivity in the process. But that procedure too was soon dropped and Boder allowed face-to-face exchanges between himself and the interviewees. His scripted questions were increasingly replaced with exclamations of amazement that such things could have occurred as described. If he was speaking with someone whose language he did not know (for example, Polish) he was now eager to record their testimony anyway and told them (via some basic German or Yiddish that they would know) "Go ahead and speak freely in your native language; we will translate it all later."

Clearly the Germany he had known forty years before, with its evolved civilization and stable society – its respect for learning and orderly process – had been replaced by a brutalist regime that had moved well beyond mere authoritarianism. When Boder finished the final interview he spoke directly to the recorder, nearly in tears, and exclaimed "Who shall judge my work?" By this he meant: who shall – and should – judge the enormity of what he had been able to uncover? Politically, judicially, academically? That question remains with us to this day, over sixty years later.

The remainder of Boder's life from this point can be quickly summarized. He had only 15 years left to live. The transcription and translation of the interviews became his life's focus. Toward that end, he obtained a series of small grants from the National Institute of Mental Health, which began in the late 1940s and lasted until 1957. He suffered a heart attack in 1949. He retired from IIT in 1952 and moved to Los Angeles to live near his daughter, who was now a physician. He obtained office space at UCLA for his project (though no salary) and continued with the translation/transcription work until funds ran out in 1957. In around 1950 he sent to the Library of Congress (LOC) a copy set (also on wire) of his 1946 interviews. This was particularly fortunate, for Boder took the original wires with him to Los Angeles in 1952 but did not bequeath them to UCLA at the time of his death (though other miscellaneous materials were turned over). Their location (if they still exist) is presently unknown. There is evidence from the late 1950s that he wished to send the original wires to Israel, but then the trail goes cold. Boder died of a heart attack in Los Angeles in the morning of December 18, 1961. Earlier that same year, the trial of Adolph Eichmann in Israel had deepened awareness of the Holocaust throughout the world, after an initial period in which even the Israelis were unwilling to widely discuss the horrendous victimization their people had undergone the 1930s and 1940s.

Issues in Preserving the Voices of the Holocaust

In the late 1990s, the Illinois Institute of Technology's Galvin Library created its initial website devoted to Boder's wire recordings. It created electronic copies of the seventy transcriptions that Boder had been able to finish by 1957. It also purchased from the Library of Congress a complete DAT tape set of the LOC's wire recordings (second generation) of the Boder interviews. From these DAT tapes, Galvin Library selected a dozen

Figure 3. *Marvin Camras' wire recorder project received strong developmental support when he was hired by the Armour Research Foundation in 1940. Here he stands with an improved version of his recorder while wearing a lab coat of the foundation.*

audio interviews to load onto its new "Voices of the Holocaust" website. In 2007-2009, Galvin Library renewed its commitment to the website, obtaining grant support from various foundations, towards the goal of uploading all the remaining audio interviews and translations/transcriptions of the same. It was decided to link the audio files with the text, whereby a viewer could listen to the audio interview while an original language transcription (or English translation) text would scroll along on the screen. This way, viewers could understand the testimony while also feeling the full emotional impact of the testimony (even if delivered in a language unknown to them).

Having reviewed the related stories of Boder's life and his chief life's work, this presentation will end with a discussion of some of the issues facing the Galvin Library team in 2007-2009 as it sought to "perfect" Boder's work via the "Voices of the Holocaust" website. These were grouped in three areas: 1) the condition of the available recordings; 2) copyright issues; and, 3) the role of scholarship and further input.

The available audio recordings present a variety of challenges. The original wires were created on a wire recorder that imparted its own hums and distortions. The uneven power grid found in Europe in 1946 affected the capabilities of the recorder. On top of these, the interviews were conducted in displaced persons' camps where much background noise is to be heard. Next comes the issue of the generations of reproduction involved. As indicated in the preceding narrative, Boder's 1946 recordings were transferred to another wire set in around 1950 for the Library of Congress – which then made a DAT copy set for IIT in the late 1990s – and those DAT tapes were then transferred to gold CDs in 2007-08 by Chicago audio engineering firms (in the employ of IIT).

At the point when IIT was shopping around for audio engineers in 2007-2008, we found that audio engineers were likely (not surprisingly) to interpose their own restorative philosophies. For example, the first firm we engaged believed that the most important goal was to render the spoken words as intelligible as possible. To that end, they diminished much of the background noise (doors opening and closing; people climbing stairs); and while producing a result where intelligibility had been increased, the "patina" of depth and ambient sounds had been unreasonably diminished. For those of us on the core team, this would not do. For the burden of intelligibility no longer solely rested on the recordings as we now had full translations and transcriptions available for the public. This gave us some room to restore some of the patina, so that listeners would be reminded of the crowded and sometimes chaotic conditions under which Boder worked in 1946. Our initial audio engineering firm was slow to grasp the balance we wished to strike, so eventually we moved on to another firm that did grasp the concept.

Other presenters at the 2013 ARSC conference also commented on the desirability of audio "restoration" that creates results that are arguably "better than reality." This leads us to the issue of what is "truth" in sound. How much of an imperfect patina should be left, or removed, is a very subjective issue. Audio engineers have enormous power in this area, as readers of this journal know very well. It is not surprising to find the issue operative when it comes to cleaning up commercial recordings of musical performances. My contribution to this area is to advise you that the issue presents itself in academic audio collections as well.

Next comes the issue of copyrights. In our case, we were very lucky here. The original 1946 project was an IIT project; Boder concluded most interviews with an announce-

Figure 4. *Camras' wire recorder was transformed into portable and rugged form when the Armour Research Foundation received a contract from the U.S. Navy to render it useful for military operations during World War II. This also made it useful for war correspondents.*

ment of that fact. Though the original wires are now lost, the copy set provided by Boder to the Library of Congress in around 1950 did not lessen the freedom of IIT to reclaim the work for its own purposes. Next, Boder himself operated under a philosophy of dissemination; more value would be gained by promoting use as opposed to controlling use (one thinks of the comparable philosophy of Nina Paley with her "Sita Sings the Blues"). Finally, Boder left only one heir, who is now deceased without issue – even if there was a reasonable concern that the Boder estate possessed any residual rights to the material.

Finally, there remains the issue of scholarship and other input. Just as the core team wrestled with the issue of "patina" in the audio files, we also had to consider how much contextual information to provide in support of the transcriptions/translations. Many references made by Boder and his interviewees are sufficiently obscure to readers (seventy years after World War II) that some explanations were deemed highly desirable. To that end, we set up a "Scholars' Advisory Committee" and invited members to write short essays to accompany many of the transcriptions/translations.

This actually posed less of a challenge than dealing with other interested parties – for example, relatives of some of the interviewees. We have been approached by some of relatives who have informed us that they know of untruths in their relatives' testimony which they would like to see "corrected." We did not think it safe, however, to elevate such information to the level of a scholarly contribution by appending it to the web site by way of footnotes or other devices. For scholars provide context while being generally recognized as both experts AND "outsiders"; readers are free to accept, reject, or partly accept any such contribution as offered by a credentialed and (supposedly) impartial observer. Others, however, who claim a greater and direct interest, with a right to "correct" (as with the case of some relatives), must be handed more delicately – but also not allowed to alter the testimony as articulated by the survivors in 1946.

Once one starts down the slippery slope of allowing others to "correct" survivors' testimony, one very quickly would be managing a controversial blog as opposed to a stable, authoritative academic website. As IIT's Assistant University Archivist, I was able to propose a different solution: those who wished to submit such "corrections" were welcome to do so in writing, with the understanding that paper copies of the same would be filed in a standard archival collection in the IIT Archives – but that no changes or footnoting would occur to the transcriptions/translations on the web site. Researchers could then read those contributions with full knowledge that they were reading advocacy material – points of view that are not endorsed by IIT's Galvin Library.

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