

Five Points of Entry: Judy Lachman's Group Photo from August 1942

Tahel Rachel Goldsmith



Fig. 1 Akiva group photo, August 1942, USHMM. Only two of the depicted survived the war.

- 1 Through war, ghettoization, deportations, and forced labor, [Judy Lachman](#) (1921-1997) carried and protected from harm photographs of friends and family members, mementos of her life before and during World War II.¹ One of these pictures depicts members of the [youth Zionist organization Akiva](#), active in the resistance movement at the [Tomaszów Mazowiecki ghetto](#) (1940-1943) in central Poland.² Jewish youth organizations like Akiva, which flourished in interwar Poland, provided spaces of belonging to young Jews in the wake of growing national unrest and antisemitism. During the war, these networks were instrumental to [the spiritual and cultural survival of young Jews, and Jewish armed resistance to the Nazis](#).³
- 2 Inspired by the methodology of object biography, this article examines the Akiva photograph's visual and material qualities, the transformations it underwent during the war, and its mediation and remediation after the war.⁴ I argue that the photo embodies both the fragility and resilience of survival. Its damaged material state tells a layered story: of the ghetto's brutal reality, the victims' fate, and Lachman's extraordinary efforts to preserve the memory of her loved ones through the upheavals of war. Folded, creased, and carried inside her body, the photo became a precious relic, resisting the

Nazi attempt to erase an entire people and their world.

- 3 At the same time, the photo's afterlife reveals how its role shifted from personal artifact to public memorial, signaling broader themes of memory, postmemory, and counter-archival practices. Through five points of entry: the photograph's content, the scarred materiality of its surface, its postwar protection and reinterpretation, its archiving, and its eventual digitization, this analysis considers the Akiva group photo as an object that transcends its initial function, carrying testimonial, material, and symbolic weight.

First Point of Entry: The Content of the Photograph

- 4 The group photo captures twenty-seven people—men and women, boys and girls—posed in four terraced rows. Young adults and children stand, sit, and lie on the ground, leaning on one another in gestures of closeness and care across gender and age differences. Their short sleeve attire and one girl's sunglasses suggest that it is

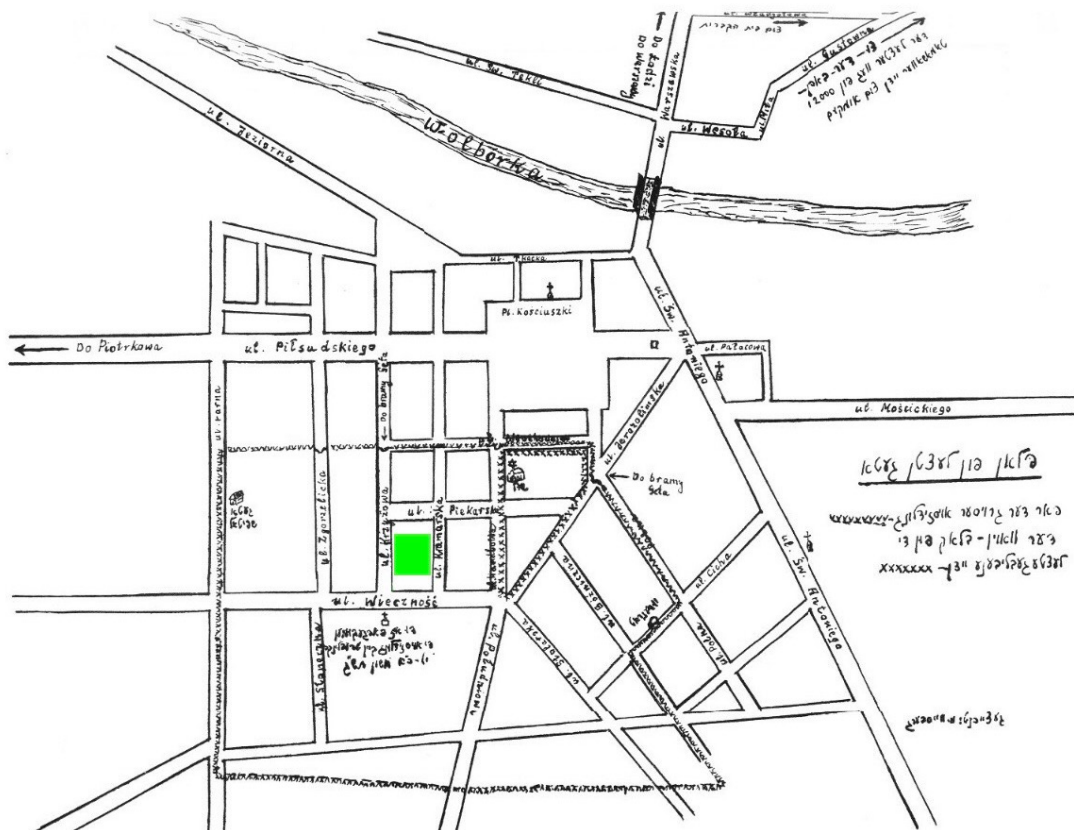


Fig. 4 Sketch of the ghetto map, taken from the Tomaszów Mazowiecki commemoration book (yizker bukh), published in 1964. The estimated location of the garden is marked in green (mark added by author). In the postwar era, many survivor communities collectively created commemoration books (yizker bikher), which chronicled the town's Jewish history and memorialized its victims. Often, a survivor of the town jotted from memory a map of the ghetto, which was incorporated into the section detailing the wartime period. Moshe Wajsbberg, ed., *Sefer zikaron li-kehilat Tomashov-Mazovitsk* (Tel Aviv: 'Irgun Yotsey Tomashov-Mazovitsk be-Yisra'el, 1969), 352. New York Public Library Digital Collections, accessed November 5, 2025, <https://digitalcollections.nysl.org/items/94e29060-0c99-0133-f2f8-58d385a7bbdo>.

summer. Sunlight highlights their faces as they squint towards the camera. Their facial expressions are cheerful, proud, and even mischievous. They look vital, young, and determined.

- 5 [In her 1995 USC Shoah Foundation interview](#), Lachman recounted how the Akiva group met regularly in the fenced garden within the ghetto, where they cultivated a vegetable garden to feed sick members. All school and children's activities in the ghetto were strictly forbidden, and violating this rule was punishable by death. To avoid detection by the authorities, Akiva members dug a hole in the ground of the garden. There, they conducted regular meetings. Lachman taught a group of first graders how to read and write. During their gatherings one member would stand guard, warning the others if police approached.⁵
- 6 The dangerous reality of hunger, disease and deportations which surrounded the Akiva members is almost indiscernible in the group photo. Instead, the photograph offers a glimpse into a world where the social bonds and vitality of the Akiva members are rendered meaningful. The protagonists are framed in a tightly packed composition: the figures standing up and lying down mark the top and bottom edge of the frame; the ground and the sky are hardly visible. The depicted are the only subject of this photograph, captured in gestures of self-determination, care and solidarity.
- 7 The group photo depicts the members of the Akiva group as masters of their fate, momentarily asserting their agency within a world designed to strip it away. In this sense, the photo reflects what Georges Didi-Huberman describes as “images in spite of all”—relics of truth and testimony that survive against forces intent on their annihilation.⁶ Like the clandestine [photos taken by the Sonderkommando prisoners in Birkenau](#), Lachman's cherished photo is especially meaningful because it was captured by those marked for eradication.⁷ The testimony it portrays inverts the dehumanizing gaze of widely circulated perpetrator photography, taken from the perspective of the Nazis.⁸ In perpetrator photography, as in many forms of racial photography, the photographic gaze objectifies, pathologizes and typologizes the photographed.⁹ By contrast, Lachman's photograph restores humanity to the victims. It saves them from anonymity, capturing those who, at the time, still dared to pose for the camera, asserting their presence even as the forces of erasure closed in.

Second Point of Entry: The Photo's Surface

- 8 Georges Didi-Huberman reminds us that a photograph's testimonial value extends beyond what is initially discernible. In his analysis of the Sonderkommando photographs, he examines [the black and blurry areas of the images](#)—parts initially deemed “illegible”—as meaningful traces of the experience of the photographer.¹⁰ These obscure areas, he argues, bear witness not only to the scene depicted but also to the conditions of their creation—the haste, fear, and precariousness of the moment.¹¹ Didi-Huberman finds testimony in visual absences, but his logic can also extend to the photo's material qualities. Interpreting Lachman's photo as a three-dimensional object reveals layers of testimony revealed by “reading” its material damage, attesting to its physical journey and preservation.

9 Judy Lachman’s story illuminates the extraordinary lengths she took to preserve this and other photographs during the war. According to her [USC Shoah Foundation testimony](#), Lachman’s involvement with the Akiva movement was consequential for her survival strategies and resistance efforts.¹² In 1942, as news of Jewish extermination spread throughout all the ghettos in Nazi-occupied Poland, the Akiva central leadership in Cracow shifted its goal from providing welfare services to youth to arming them with guns and forged documents for resistance purposes.¹³ Lachman, who was understood to have an Aryan appearance, was among the first in her group to receive forged papers for underground operations.

10 Before she left the Tomaszów Mazowiecki ghetto, Lachman’s mother, aware of the grave risk her daughter was taking, gave her a celluloid tube filled with precious gems. She bid her farewell with the words, “Go. Maybe you will survive.” Her brother added a cyanide pill in case she was captured. Along with these items, Lachman packed in her bag a few family photos and the Akiva group picture. For the next two months, she smuggled supplies and information in and out of the Piotrków Trybunalski ghetto, where her father had been trapped since 1940. She briefly reunited with him in August 1942, only to lose him weeks later when he was deported to the [Treblinka](#) extermination camp.¹⁴ In the chaos of the deportation, she also lost her Aryan papers and was eventually caught, deported, and sent to several labor camps.

11 Lachman worked in an ammunition factory for nearly two years under dire conditions. In mid-1944, as Russian forces approached, she was transferred to the [Buchenwald concentration camp](#).¹⁵ Anticipating the confiscation of her belongings, Lachman prepared to protect her photos. While still enroute to her destination, she cut the heads of her mother, father, and brother, along with a picture of herself from before the war, out of the photos in her possession. She then rolled these cutouts—along with the Akiva group photo—and placed them in the celluloid tube her mother had given her. From that moment, Lachman protected the tube during camp selections by hiding it inside her rectum, thus ensuring the photographs survived the war. Reflecting on her decision, Lachman said in 1995, “They were tiny, but they still gave me something that I felt that I



Fig. 2 Photograph of Gitel Strykowska, Judy Lachman’s mother, taken for her daughter’s Aryan papers, 1942. Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center.

came from — not just from stones.”

- 12 Lachman, along with her precious mementos, survived against overwhelming odds. The group photo’s deteriorated condition tells the story of its physical journey. The deep horizontal and vertical creases, punctures, and asymmetrical edges indicate that the photo had been folded, rolled, and compressed. Its condition suggests that it was folded twice and rolled tightly to make it compact and small to avoid detection. These storage conditions resulted in fractures along the folds and rounded, eroded corners caused by friction and handling. The left side’s deeper creases indicate it may have been rolled outward, with additional evenly spaced vertical creases suggesting it was pressed while folded. These impressions highlight the tension between damage and preservation—the same actions that injured the surface also protected the photo’s colors, shielding it from humidity and water damage that often leads to fading or discoloration. Lachman’s acts of concealment point to a survival strategy which entailed a deliberate effort to preserve the past and provide strength in the present, even as survival remained uncertain.

- 13 A particularly striking detail is the square cut-out in the top-right corner, where a missing face was once framed. Unlike the frayed edges and rounded corners caused by wear, this cut is sharp and precise, suggesting it was made later, with scissors or a knife. In her testimony, Lachman explains why and how she made the cut. In late April 1945, American soldiers liberated Lachman in a subcamp of [Dachau concentration camp](#) in Germany.¹⁶ Miraculously, Lachman found her brother, who also survived. In one of the transit camps, she met an old friend from her hometown of Tomaszów Mazowiecki. Lachman showed her the Akiva photo. To her friend’s great surprise, she recognized her sister. Lachman knew the value of having photographs of loved ones when nothing else remained of them. She cut out one last piece from her precious treasure—a little square, immediately above her own visage, containing Lonia Lisopraska’s face—and gifted it to Lonia’s surviving sister. Now, she, too, could have a memento of her



Fig. 3 Photograph of Joseph Strykowski, Judy Lachman’s father, that formed part of a group photo from which Lachman cut out her father’s head. Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center.

family.

- 14 Lachman’s alteration of the photograph highlights the photo’s adaptive uses—transformed from a group portrait into a portable talisman and keepsake—one small enough to carry and hold close. Such a rare family portrait serves to counteract, in a small yet significant manner, some of the trauma and pain associated with the irretrievable loss of loved ones who were never buried and whose records and traces were systematically destroyed. As Marianne Hirsch observes, unlike public images or images of atrocity, family photos and the familial aspects of postmemory “tend to diminish distance, bridge separation, and facilitate identification and affiliation.”¹⁷ Seen this way, Lachman’s keeping of the photos, and the generous gift she made to her friend, “a poor man’s gift,” counteracted years of persecution, dispossession, and erasure by restoring a family member’s image and providing some comfort.
- 15 The photo’s surface is thus more than a visual record; it functions as a material testimony—a scarred relic that speaks to personal and collective trauma and survival. Its scars, folds, cuts, and preserved colors mirror Lachman’s own suffering and bodily endurance, reflect her immense loss but also strategies of spiritual and physical survival, and embody her generosity and kindness to others.

Third Point of Entry: Lachman’s Gold Family Tree

- 16 The Akiva group photo appears in [the last part of Lachman’s USC Shoah Foundation interview](#) from 1995, alongside other family pictures she saved using the only tool she had left—her body.¹⁸ Sometime after immigrating to the United States, Lachman sought to protect these fragile relics by framing them. She preserved their connection to each other by placing them in a photo holder shaped like a tree made of gold and



Fig. 4 Judy Lachman’s framed family photographs, film still from USC Shoah Foundation interview.

silver. The tree's branches symbolize regeneration and regrowth, especially of the family tree. In her interview, Lachman shows the camera the tree and the Akiva photo and then continues to show photos of her children and grandchildren—through which the previously severed family tree now regrows. She thus connects her traumatic history with a present of healing and the transference of memory through the family tree.

- 17 Hirsch's concept of familial postmemory helps illuminate the emotional and symbolic weight of this golden tree. Hirsch emphasizes that survivors rely on media such as photographs and testimony to transmit memories to later generations, embedding them with affective and psychic resonance. However, because survivor memories are traumatic, their expression is fraught and fragmented. In the case of photographs, Hirsch argues, "images that survive massive devastation and outlive their subjects and owners function as ghostly revenants from an irretrievably lost past world."¹⁹ As I have shown, the traumatic aspect of the photos lies in their materiality, but also in our knowledge that so few of the depicted survived the war. Lachman emphasizes this tragic dimension of the photos when she describes the images in the golden tree: "These are the pictures I carried in my rectum of my family. Very few survivors have pictures of their family, so I consider myself fortunate that I have them."
- 18 The golden tree transforms these "ghostly revenants," reframing them as sacred by encasing them in glass and precious, durable metals, thereby safeguarding them against further deterioration and ensuring their survival. This survival is further guaranteed within the safety of Lachman's familial home, where the interview takes place, and where her family members can interact with the displayed artifacts, learning about their ancestors and Lachman's trauma and survival.

Fourth Point of Entry: The Public Archive

- 19 Judy Lachman, who passed away in 1997, was an activist for Holocaust education in her survivor community in Skokie, Illinois. From the mid-1980s, she was the vice president of the [Illinois Holocaust Memorial Foundation](#) (IHMF), which established a small Holocaust museum on Main Street, Skokie.²⁰ The space quickly became both a community hub for Chicago-area survivors and an education center on Holocaust history. In 2009, the foundation inaugurated the [Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Centre](#) (ILHMEC) in a larger, more professionalized space.²¹ With its founding generation of survivors aging, the museum committed itself to safeguarding their legacies. Many survivors, including Lachman, entrusted the museum with personal artifacts and documents tied to their wartime stories—items they had preserved privately for decades.
- 20 Lachman donated nearly 130 letters, photographs, and official documents to ILHMEC in 1989 and 1994, transferring deeply personal and familial objects into the custody of a public institution. As Hirsch observes, such acts represent a shift from familial postmemory—the vertical transmission of memory within families—to affiliative postmemory, a broader, collective identification with traumatic histories.²² While familial postmemory is shaped by intimate bonds and direct inheritance, affiliative postmemory engages those without direct ties to the events, often mobilizing "familial structures of mediation and representation" to create affective resonance.²³

- 21 The ILHMEC collection may be understood as a counter-archive—a repository that resists the silences and erasures perpetuated by traditional archives. As Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook have famously argued, traditional archives are sites where the powerful shape historical memory to reinforce dominance.²⁴ The Nazis demonstrated this logic by systematically destroying Jewish personal and communal records during the Holocaust, erasing almost all archival traces of generations of Jewish life in Europe.²⁵
- 22 In contrast, counter-archives recover voices and histories marginalized or obliterated in official records. These collections often rely on non-traditional media, such as oral testimonies and personal artifacts, to restore justice and create a space for repair and remembrance.²⁶ ILHMEC exemplifies this approach, working to recuperate—even if only partially—the lives and stories the Nazis sought to erase, while working to generate awareness of issues concerning human rights and genocide prevention.²⁷ The Akiva photo is an example of a personal artifact stored in the ILHMEC counter-archival collection.

Fifth and Last Point of Entry: The Digital Archive

- 23 In 2014, Lachman’s husband, Earl “Al” Lachman—himself a survivor and activist—donated additional photographs to ILHMEC, including a copy of the Akiva group photo analyzed in this article. He gave another copy to the [United States Holocaust Memorial Museum](#) (USHMM).²⁸ Today, digital reproductions of the photo exist on museum servers, websites, and physical archives. Notably, however, the original photograph remains in the Lachman family’s possession. The age of digital reproducibility allows families like the Lachmans to retain their personal connections to memory while simultaneously enabling the photo’s integration into affiliative networks of transmittance. Circulating online and in institutional archives, the Akiva group photo illustrates the agency community members have in processes of transition from personal to public memory. Yet this shift also signals the ongoing transformation of the Holocaust from lived experience to historical narrative, raising questions about how stored objects and media, open to diverse interpretations, may be understood in the future.
- 24 In 2009, Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer articulated the central challenge that Holocaust Studies still faces today: grappling with the conflicting legacies of this genocide. Some attribute the Holocaust primarily to antisemitism, concluding that its most important lesson is that such atrocities must never happen again to Jews. Others view racism more broadly as the root cause, emphasizing that such atrocities must never happen again to anyone. The first conclusion risks reinforcing exclusionary and nationalist tendencies, while the second embraces a more universal and inclusive approach. Reflecting on the role of witness testimony and the ongoing prevalence of human rights violations and atrocities, Hirsch and Spitzer advocate for creating witness testimony archives that cross cultural and group identities. They envision “a broadened, universalized archive of memory... to apply the future-oriented lessons that many have derived from the Holocaust... truly responding to the ethical provocation that witness testimony has transmitted and conveyed across generations and political boundaries.”²⁹

Lachman herself echoes this underlying sentiment at the conclusion of her USC Shoah Foundation interview: “I feel there is room enough for everybody. We should produce food instead of ammunition. Maybe we can learn to tolerate each other, to live with each other, to help each other. It’s about time.”³⁰ While her concluding statement expresses a broad humanistic vision of coexistence, Hirsch and Spitzer offer a concrete framework for enacting this ethos through the creation of archives that connect witness testimonies across cultural and group identities.

- 25 Yet, Lachman’s words also remind us of the fragility of this vision. The journey of the Akiva photo itself embodies this tension. It is both a deeply personal remnant—folded, carried, and preserved at great risk—and a document that has been incorporated into public archives, where it becomes part of a broader conversation about the lessons of history. Counter-archives like those at ILHMEC seek to navigate this delicate balance, commemorating the specificity of Jewish suffering while also engaging with the imperatives to prevent genocide and atrocity wherever they occur. As Holocaust memory shifts from lived experience into the realm of history, the challenge becomes more pressing yet remains unresolved: how to preserve the particular stories embedded in objects like the Akiva photograph while also allowing them to challenge and educate the public. In this sense, counter-archives are not static repositories but active spaces where the meaning of artifacts and the ethical provocations of Holocaust testimony are negotiated, shaped and reshaped in response to an increasingly fragmented and uncertain world.
- 26 **Acknowledgement:** *Tahel Rachel Goldsmith gratefully acknowledges the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center for providing access to the photos. She is also grateful to the USC Shoah Foundation for allowing her to use transcripts of the testimony of Judy Lachman (1995).*

Citation guide

1. Tahel Rachel Goldsmith, “Five Points of Entry: Judy Lachman’s Group Photo from August 1942,” Object Narrative, *MAVCOR Journal* 9, no. 2 (2025), 10.22332/mav.obj.2025.4.

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Notes

1. “Survivor Profiles: Judy Lachman,” Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center, accessed June 18, 2025, <https://www.ilholocaustmuseum.org/profiles/judy-lachman/>.
2. Ido Bassok, “Akiva,” YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe, accessed March 16, 2024, <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Akiva>; “Tomaszów Mazowiecki: A

town and its destruction under the Nazi Occupation,” Holocaust Education and Archival Research Team, accessed June 18, 2025, <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/nazioccupation/tomaszow-mazowiecki.html>.

3. “Jewish Youth Movements in Wartime Poland: From Minority to Leadership,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed June 18, 2025, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jewish-youth-movements-in-wartime-poland-from-minority-to-leadership>.

4. Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, eds., *Photographs Objects Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (London: Routledge, 2004). In this publication, Edward and Hart present essays that mobilize the methodology of object biography for analyzing photographs. In their introduction, “Introduction: photographs as objects,” 1–18, the authors emphasize that although photographs may seem like strictly visual depictions, their analysis benefits, and indeed often demands, a reading of their materiality. These material qualities include, but are not limited to, issues of development, reproduction, circulation, exhibition, storage, and preservation.

5. “Holocaust Survivor Judy Lachman | USC Shoah Foundation,” YouTube video, [2:53:15], posted by USC Shoah Foundation, June 16, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ew6OAKCseyY>.

A map of Tomaszów Mazowiecki can be found at Sztetl, accessed July 20, 2025, <https://sztetl.org.pl/>. Kryżowa Street runs along the marked Star of David, which denotes the location of the ghetto. The adjacent solid grey square marks the garden and is probably the same place where the group photo was taken.

Judy Lachman, *Interview 3605*, interview by Susan London, Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, June 29, 1995. Accessed March 16, 2024.

6. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 22–23.

7. “Inside the Epicenter of the Horror—Photographs of the Sonderkommando,” Yad Vashem, accessed June 18, 2025, <https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/general/epicenter-horror-photographs-sonderkommando.html>; Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 43.

8. Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 133–39.

9. Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39 (1986): 3–64.

10. “Sonderkommando Photographs from Auschwitz,” Jewish Virtual Library, accessed June 18, 2025, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/sonderkommando-photographs-from-auschwitz>.

11. Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All*, 34–37.

12. Lachman, *Interview 3605*.

The USC Shoah Foundation database holds approximately 57,500 oral testimonies from Holocaust survivors collected and recorded since the mid 1990s, as well as testimonies from survivors of other events of mass violence and genocide in the twentieth century.

13. Lachman, *Interview 3605*.

14. “Treblinka,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed June 18, 2025, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/treblinka>.

15. “Buchenwald,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed June 18, 2025, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/buchenwald>.

16. “Dachau,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed June 18, 2025, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/dachau>.

17. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 38.

18. “Holocaust Survivor Judy Lachman,” YouTube video, 02:46:30-02:50:00.

19. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 36.

20. “Mission & History,” Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center, accessed June 18, 2025, <https://www.ilholocaustmuseum.org/about/history/>.

21. Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center, accessed June 18, 2025, <https://www.ilholocaustmuseum.org/>; For an overview of the museum’s history and its transition from survivor to professional leadership see: Sean Jacobson, “Skokie as Sanctuary: Holocaust Survivor Leadership at the Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 116, no. 1 (April 1, 2023): 9–41, <https://doi.org/10.5406/23283335.116.1.03>.

22. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 32–36.

23. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 39.

24. Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (March 2002): 1–19.

25. Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record!: Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 132–33.

26. David A. Wallace et al., eds., *Archives, Recordkeeping, and Social Justice*, Routledge Studies in Archives (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 242.

27. See, for example, the museum’s involvement in the Illinois Holocaust & Genocide Commission: “Mission Statement,” Illinois Holocaust & Genocide Commission, accessed July 20, 2025, <https://hgc.illinois.gov/>.

28. Group portrait of members of the Akiva Zionist youth movement in Tomaszow Mazowiecki,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collections Catalog, photo no.

85466, accessed June 18, 2025, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa14341>.

29. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "The Witness in the Archive: Holocaust Studies/Memory Studies," *Memory Studies* 2, no. 2 (2009): 151–70, 165.

30. Lachman, Interview 3605.



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