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Reorienting perspectives: sonic possibilities of the preserved survivor voice in USHMM's longitudinal *First Person* program

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how Holocaust survivor testimony changes over time by focusing on the US Holocaust Memorial Museum's *First Person* programme, a unique longitudinal archive that records survivors' voices across multiple decades. Drawing on distant and close listening methodologies, I analyse subtle yet meaningful shifts in vocal delivery – such as tone, cadence, tempo and emotional inflection – that occur as survivors age and as their relationship to memory, audience and institutional setting evolves. By tracking survivors' voices over time, this article argues for the value of vocal analysis in Holocaust studies, voice studies and sound studies, demonstrating how sound enhances our understanding of survivor experiences. Using spectrogram analysis of audio recordings from two recurring participants, Nesse Godin (–1928–2024) and Fritz Gluckstein (1927–2021), I show that the ageing voice is not merely a symptom of time but a dynamic site of memory work, affective resonance and ethical listening.

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Introduction

Since 2000, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) has presented *First Person*, a public programme in which audiences witness live, moderated interviews between Holocaust survivors and a host – most often longtime interviewer Bill Benson.¹ Described by Benson as “an extraordinary opportunity for survivors to share what they went through, to an audience that likely has never heard anything like it”, the programme has featured annual conversations with more than 100 survivors. Unlike static testimony collections, *First Person* offers a distinctive record of testimonial dialogue shaped not only by age, audience and institutional setting, but also by habitual recurrence – captured not once, but across many consecutive years. This longitudinal structure, Benson notes, allows him to return to moments that survivors may initially gloss over, often helping them articulate emotional truths they might not otherwise express on their own.

What sets *First Person* apart is not its premise – similar programmes exist at institutions worldwide – but its inadvertent, or perhaps secondarily intended, creation of a longitudinal testimonial archive. While institutional collections such as Yale's Fortunoff

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For Fritz, whose voice that rose and resonated, for the echoes that linger still, and for reminding me that a voice, once shared, can inspire in ways words cannot contain.

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Archive, the USC Shoah Foundation and USHMM's broader oral history department (established in 1988) are also committed to preserving survivor testimony and are publicly accessible to varying degrees, they are not structured around repeated, performative acts of narration. *First Person*, by contrast, was conceived as a live, educational performance of memory for public audiences – not as an archival project.² Yet over time, it has become just that: an evolving record of repeated survivor appearances, often spanning more than a decade. As Aleida Assmann notes, "An archive is not a museum: it is not designed for public access and popular presentations ... " (Assmann 2006, 264). In the case of *First Person*, this claim is rendered paradoxical, as the programme is built entirely around public engagement, with its archive emerging as a secondary outcome.

Of particular interest in this article is the temporal structure of this archive, which captures both continuity and transformation in survivor testimony. The collection now holds nearly two decades of annual – and often habitual – testimony from individual survivors, offering rare insight into how testimony changes across time. Within this accumulation lie subtle but significant vocal shifts in tone, cadence and narrative inflection that are either consciously shaped or emergent through the labour of memory, emotional resonance or what Henry Greenspan describes as a voice suspended in "some precarious balance", containing "both the rhythms of its origins and the cacophony of its dissolution" (Greenspan 2010, 78).

Although longitudinal testimonies exist within archives like institutional collections listed previously, *First Person* is unique in its deliberately consistent format. Survivors return annually to the same institutional setting, with the same interviewer, and speak within a stable, moderated structure. Unlike other archives, where recordings are often separated by decades and shaped by shifting conditions, *First Person* offers an unparalleled opportunity for controlled, temporal and acoustic analysis. This article presents *First Person* not in opposition to other archives, but as a case study that foregrounds the distinct affordances of sonic and longitudinal listening when testimonial conditions remain remarkably stable.

This study brings together humanistic and computational approaches to examine how Holocaust survivor voices transform over time. Focusing on *First Person*, I analyse select recordings from two participants – Nesse Godin (1928–2024) and Fritz Gluckstein (1927–2021) – focusing on two moments from Godin's testimony and one from Gluckstein's to trace how vocal delivery and affect shift across time within the *First Person* programme. Through a combination of close listening (attuned to breath, cadence and emotional delivery) and distant listening (using spectrogram visualisations to trace vocal patterns), I examine how testimony is reshaped by ageing, relational dynamics and institutional environments. By tracking survivors' voices across time, I argue for the value of vocal analysis in Holocaust studies, voice studies and sound studies – demonstrating how sound enhances our understanding of survivor experience and memory transmission.

While Holocaust studies have long examined the visual, textual, narrative and conversational dimensions of testimonial voice, far less attention has been paid to the vocal *affect* of survivor voices – their shifts in texture, pacing and resonance over time. Where sound and music studies have addressed the Holocaust, such work has tended to focus on historical, biographical or compositional narratives – individual musicians, specific works or music in the camps – rather than on survivor voice as a sonic medium. This article addresses that absence by offering a model of longitudinal vocal analysis that captures

the affective labour of testimony. The voice here is not a fixed vessel of memory but a dynamic, ageing and relational practice.

By foregrounding the temporal and affective nuances encoded in survivor voices, I aim to encourage an interdisciplinary approach that bridges Holocaust studies, voice theory and sound studies. This article offers not only a method for listening to memory differently, but also an invitation for future scholars to expand this work. Even within this study, limits remain; there are further ways to listen. Yet it is precisely through this listening – repeated, attuned and evolving – that we can begin to grasp the full resonance of what survivor testimony continues to carry.

In what follows, I begin by outlining the historical and theoretical contexts of Holocaust testimony, then introduce a sonic methodology grounded in close and distant listening. I next apply this framework to selected case studies before concluding with a reflection on the broader implications for both Holocaust and sound studies, and the need for more deeply interdisciplinary approaches to listening.

What is Holocaust “testimony”

Testimony. The term holds varied meanings across disciplines. For ethnomusicologists, it may evoke R. Murray Schafer’s concept of the “ear witness”, or gesture towards critical approaches to oral history (Schafer 1993). In the context of music history, it might recall Steve Reich’s *Different Trains*, a work that layers recorded voices of Holocaust survivors over string quartet music to juxtapose Reich’s childhood train rides in the U.S. with the trains that carried Jews to death camps (Reich 2011). In contrast, scholars from the growing field of music copyright law may interpret testimony more conventionally as “witness statements made under oath”.³ Across these fields, the meaning of testimony shifts, shaped by disciplinary frameworks, historical contexts and ethical commitments.

Among these, the legal framework holds weight in Holocaust studies, where the distinction between courtroom testimony and oral survivor narratives has long informed debates over authenticity, memory and representation. Holocaust scholar Anna Hájková draws attention to this divide, distinguishing between the evidentiary constraints of trial testimony and the subjective, affectively inflected nature of oral accounts. These differences, she argues, stem not only from content but from genre, each form of testimony emerges from specific institutional, interpersonal and narrative conventions (Hájková 2017, 88). Her insight echoes a broader consensus in Holocaust studies: testimony is not a transparent transmission of memory, but a mediated act shaped by audience, context and purpose.

Todd Presner further develops this idea in *Ethics of the Algorithm*, tracing *testimony* to the Latin *testimonium* (evidence) and *testis* (third-party witness). Though often tied to factuality, Presner emphasises testimony’s ethical and narrative dimensions as a moral act of storytelling formed through speaker-listener exchange (Presner 2024, 8–9). His work reframes listening as both a computational and ethical act, shaped by infrastructures of power, platform design and algorithmic mediation.

Still, even familiar terms like “testimony”, “oral history”, and “memory” can obscure more than they reveal. Henry Greenspan warns that these categories risk flattening the evolving and contingent nature of survivor narratives. He proposes “recounting” as a better framework, highlighting the provisional, dialogic quality of survivor speech that

is always shaped through repetition, compromise and the presence of a listener (Greenspan 2010, xiv, 3).

This understanding of testimony as dynamic rather than fixed is reinforced by Noah Shenker, who describes testimonies as “constantly mediated, contested, and fragile acts of memory” (Shenker 2015, 2). Zoë Waxman, in her work on written testimonies, similarly argues that testimonies are constructed – not improvised – reflecting deliberate choices shaped by gender, genre and intended audience (Waxman 2003, 665–66). Both highlight how framing influences form.

The term’s instability, far from being a weakness, has made testimony a generative concept – inviting interdisciplinary inquiry and demanding attention to the interplay between speaker, listener and archive. A 2014 journal forum featuring leading scholars in the field of Holocaust studies, including Greenspan, revisited the terms “testimony” and “trauma”, emphasising two questions that continue to animate the field: Why is testimony given, and how is it shaped? (Greenspan et al. 2014). These questions remain central to understanding the history of Holocaust testimony.

Although the 1970s and 1980s are often cited as the rise of Holocaust testimony, its origins lie in the Holocaust itself. Emanuel Ringelblum’s Oyneg Shabes archive, buried in milk cans in the Warsaw Ghetto, stands as one of the most powerful examples of victims documenting their own experiences for future audiences (Kassow 2018, 8). Immediately after the war, David Boder recorded 120 interviews with displaced persons in DP camps. He did not call these “testimonies” but referred to them as narratives, personal histories, and “tales”. As Rosen and Presner note, these evolving terms reflect shifting conceptions of what counts as testimony and how it is mediated through language, storytelling devices and translation (Rosen 2010, 12; Presner 2024, 8).⁴

The 1961 Eichmann trial marked a pivotal turn. As Hannah Arendt observed, emotional testimony eclipsed legal strategy (Arendt 2006).⁵ Annette Wieviorka traced this moment as a catalyst for the global rise of Holocaust testimony (Wieviorka 2006a, 2006b, 394). Yet even as survivor accounts gained prominence, they were often subject to doubt – especially when they conflicted with historical records or defied expectations of coherence.

Public reception shifted again in 1978 with NBC’s *Holocaust* miniseries and the establishment of the U.S. President’s Commission on the Holocaust (Holocaust 1978; Linenthal 1993). Around the same time, grassroots initiatives like the Holocaust Survivors Film Project – later Yale’s Fortunoff Archive – began recording survivor interviews (Shenker 2015, 20). The founding of the USC Shoah Foundation following *Schindler’s List* (Spielberg 1993) marked the institutionalisation of Holocaust video testimony on a massive scale (Presner 2024, 7).

By the mid-1980s, oral testimony was gaining scholarly legitimacy. Lawrence Langer noted that scepticism around memory-based evidence had begun to recede (Langer 2006, 299). Christopher Browning relied on survivor accounts to reconstruct the history of the Starachowice labour camps, where written documentation was sparse (Browning 2003).

The 1990s saw a turn towards the relational aspects of testimony. Dori Laub described the “compulsion to tell” as a process through which survivors could reclaim themselves. Testimony, he argued, was incomplete without a listener. “The testimony that speaks about the dead”, he wrote, “also speaks to the dead” (Auerhahn and Laub

1990, 447). Lawrence Langer further explored the internal dimensions of memory, identifying five distinct types – Deep, Anguished, Humiliated, Tainted and Unheroic – each reflecting the fragmented and unresolved nature of Holocaust recollection (Langer 1991).

As archives expanded, so too did their methodologies. Stephen Naron and Noah Shenker have documented how institutional priorities – from interviewer training to editing procedures – shape testimonial content (Naron 2018, Shenker 2015). Amy Wlodarski emphasises the ethical complexities of this process, urging scholars to attend to power dynamics and narrative expectations in interview encounters, especially in musical or archival settings (Wlodarski 2022).

Media studies scholar Judith Keilbach complements this by showing how media structures do not simply transmit testimony but help produce it – prompting recall, shaping delivery and influencing the emergence of the witness (Keilbach 2016).

Among longitudinal studies of Holocaust testimony, Greenspan's work is foundational. Unlike large-scale archives that emphasise single-session interviews, Greenspan engaged survivors in years-long dialogue. He highlights not just narrative development but the expressive textures of voice – tone, cadence, pause – as central to how memory is formed and conveyed. Yet he also acknowledges that listeners shape what is said: what we receive as “testimony” is often what feels sayable to the other person in the room (Greenspan 2010). Still, his dialogic method differs from institutional formats like the USHMM's First Person programme, where public interviews are scheduled annually with pedagogical goals.

Jürgen Matthäus's edited volume *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor* offers another model: a multi-author, “kaleidoscopic” approach to one survivor over time, grounded in historical reconstruction more than affect or vocality (Matthaus et al. 2009). Other longitudinal studies have largely emphasised narrative consistency or thematic development rather than vocal shifts – such as changes in pitch, pace or emotional tone – over time (Schiff et al. 2006).

Although survivor voice has been addressed in Holocaust studies, much of this scholarship has concentrated on narrative structure, linguistic choice or institutional framing, rather than on the voice as a dynamic sonic and affective phenomenon. Foundational contributions by Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman conceptualise testimony as a “radical crisis of witnessing”, emphasising how trauma destabilises the relationship between speech, memory and knowledge (Laub and Felman 1992, 10). Thomas Trezise shifts the focus towards the ethical space between survivor and listener, yet his analysis privileges textual and visual engagement over auditory experience (Trezise 2013).

Zoë Waxman offers valuable insight into how survivor narratives are shaped by gender, audience, and institutional context, highlighting the performative and culturally contingent nature of testimony. However, her work remains rooted in literary forms and written memoirs, rather than in the acoustic or embodied qualities of vocal delivery (Waxman 2008).

Hannah Pollin-Galay introduces a comparative linguistic approach through her study of Lithuanian Jewish oral histories. She demonstrates how survivors' post-war environments and languages of testimony – Yiddish, English or Hebrew – influence their recollections and emotional attachments to justice, love and community (Pollin-Galay 2018). Yet

her focus stays with semantic and cultural content rather than the affective materiality of voice.

In music and sound studies, related but distinct questions have emerged about the role of sound in Holocaust memory. Shirli Gilbert critiques the post-war framing of Holocaust songs as acts of “spiritual resistance”, arguing that such interpretations can limit the emotional and memorial complexity of music composed under duress. She calls for a broader understanding of music’s commemorative power (Gilbert 2008). Amy Lynn Wlodarski builds on this work by analysing the institutional framing of testimonial encounters, particularly within archival and musical settings. While attentive to affect and narrative control, her work does not examine the testimonial voice as a sonic object, nor its evolution over time (Wlodarski 2022).

Presner brings these concerns into the digital realm, introducing the concept of *algorithmic listening* to explore how survivor voices are mediated through AI-driven platforms, voice recognition software and holographic interfaces. His work reframes listening as an ethical and computational act, shaped by algorithmic systems and platform design. Among the scholars discussed here, Presner most closely aligns with the approach advanced in this article. He directly engages with the affective and material dimensions of survivor voice, and I build on his framework to inform my own methodological approach—one that considers not only technological mediation, but also the temporal and acoustic shifts that emerge across repeated acts of narration. While his work does not explicitly focus on longitudinal vocal change, it offers vital insight into the ethics of listening and the infrastructural forces that shape testimonial sound (Presner 2024).

Methodology

My approach to “distant” and “close” listening is grounded in Presner’s framework, which defines distant listening as a humanistic use of computational tools to identify patterns and differences in the sonic record – not to generalise or abstract, but to surface “moments where voice cuts through as undeniable affect” (Presner 2024, 203).⁶ As tertiary witnesses, we are invited to slow down our listening and attend to the most granular vocal details: the pitch of a word, the breath of a sigh, a pause between phrases, or a subtle shift in cadence. Building on this model, I introduce a longitudinal dimension, asking what emerges when we analyse Holocaust survivor testimony not as a single event, but one that reflects ageing, relational dynamics and institutional environments. While language and accent are integral to vocal affect and delivery, this study narrows its focus to acoustic and expressive features such as cadence, pitch and tempo. Future research might expand this framework to examine how shifts in language use or accent further shape the sonic dimensions of testimony, especially across transnational and multilingual contexts.

To carry out this analysis, I rely on Sonic Visualiser, an open-source tool that enables layered spectrographic comparison. I use it to visualise vocal habituation and variance across years, tracing amplitude shifts, vocal pitch contour, tonal compression and the emergence of high and low points in delivery. For instance, in the case of Nesse Godin, I compare her recordings from 2002, 2006, 2013 and 2017 side by side, revealing both technical features – such as vocal compression and dynamic range – and affective

changes, including tempo shifts and softened cadence during emotionally charged passages. While this process reflects Presner's model of distant listening, it is also paired with close listening: attuning to pauses, breathwork, emotional cadence and the relational dynamic between survivor and host.

This longitudinal listening model is also in dialogue with broader work in sound and voice studies. In music theory, for instance, Steve Rings has conducted a longitudinal study of Bob Dylan's "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)", analysing over 800 performances from 1964 to 2009 (Rings 2013). Although focused on musical reinvention, his study does not attend to evolving vocalities – the affective force carried in the grain and phrasing of the voice. My work reorients that premise, placing the voice itself at the centre of memory transmission. Likewise, Matt Rahaim argues for an ontological shift in how we understand voice – not merely as something known, but as something felt, performed and relationally enacted (Rahaim 2019, 20). This study takes up that call within the context of Holocaust memory, arguing that survivor testimony must be heard not just for what it says, but for how it sounds over time.

Finally, while this project is informed by Greenspan's decades-long work on survivor voice and memory, it operates adjacent to his methodology. Greenspan emphasises the dialogic nature of testimony and the importance of allowing survivors to shape their own narrative context. His work privileges the variability of setting, interlocutor and emotional framing. By contrast, *First Person* offers a far more structured format: survivors return annually to the same institutional space, with the same host and engage in a consistent interview structure. This consistency – unusual in Holocaust archives – creates the conditions for a different kind of longitudinal analysis, one that traces changes not through evolving external contexts, but through the voice itself.⁷

In the following two case studies, I analyse three moments-two in Godin's testimony and one in Gluckstein's – that I deem represent how *First Person* offers a distinctive record of testimonial dialogue shaped not only by age, audience and institutional setting, but also by habitual recurrence – captured not once, but across many consecutive years. I selected these particular narrative moments because they offer a clear lens through which to observe both vocal and interpretive shifts over time. Nesse Godin's monologue exemplifies a transformation in narrative framing – even within a consistent testimonial setting – while her account of her father's death remains anchored by emotional continuity, with the unknowable gradually replaced by explanatory logic, though the vocal trace of grief never dissipates. For Fritz Gluckstein, the story of his father's dismissal serves as a channelling of paternal voice – what Henry Greenspan might describe as holding both the cadence of its origin and the fragmentation of its aftermath – making it a particularly resonant site for studying vocal constancy amid ageing.

Case study 1: Nesse Godin

Nesse Godin (1928–2024) was unique among *First Person* participants in that, across seventeen appearances, she consistently delivered her testimony as a monologue rather than in the programme's intended one-on-one conversational format.⁸ Until 2011, she was the only survivor to do so. Initially hesitant to engage with unfamiliar hosts, Godin retained this preference even after transitioning to the interview structure – never appearing with longtime host Bill Benson and instead choosing to speak with USHMM

historians William Meinecke and Patricia Haber Rice. From 2002 to 2009 (excluding 2004), she adhered strictly to the monologue format. In 2004, Meinecke appears as an interlocutor, but the exchange lacks dialogic depth and closely mirrors her solo narratives. In select years, however, she adds brief welcoming remarks – subtle expansions that I analyse further below.

This case study examines how Godin's longitudinal participation reveals a survivor gradually reframing her emotional engagement with memory. Her evolving delivery reflects not only ageing and repetition, but also a growing ease within the *First Person* setting – shaped by institutional familiarity and sustained relationships with the USHMM staff.

In what follows, I examine two testimonial moments across Godin's appearances. I begin with her opening monologue, applying distant listening to identify vocal consistencies that define her early years in the programme (2002–2009). I analyse recordings from 2002, 2005, 2007 and 2009—skipping 2004 due to its brief deviation into the pseudo-dialogic format – to establish a representative spectrographic sample. This sampling highlights recurring vocal features and the repetition of key phrases that structure her self-presentation. I then shift to close listening to explore how subtle expansions in her opening remarks signal an evolving relationship to the testimonial environment.

This growing comfort becomes most evident in 2011 (she did not participate in 2010), when Godin fully adopts the one-on-one format. From 2011 to her final appearance in 2017, the monologue disappears entirely, and her opening narrative shifts dramatically changing in tone and content across three distinct iterations. These variances suggest not only her deepening comfort but also her responsiveness to the pedagogical and curatorial aims of the USHMM, shaped through ongoing dialogue with staff and institutional expectations.

Finally, I turn to moment two: her account of her father's murder. Beginning with close listening, I assess the affective and vocal intensity of this passage, then return to distant listening to trace how relationality and narrative reflexivity shape the emotional and structural contours of this moment across repeated retellings.

Moment 1: opening monologue

While Godin's full opening statement varies slightly across her early years, it is the line "*I'm not a speaker, I'm not a lecturer, I'm not a teacher . . .*" that remains consistent and becomes the defining refrain in her testimonial delivery. Voiced in 2002 and repeated in nearly identical form throughout her monologue years, this line functions not merely as an introduction but as a ritualised self-positioning. Its steady rhythm, deliberate pacing and emotionally anchored delivery suggest an intentional vocal structure—one that balances testimonial authority with pointed conviction, projecting clarity and purpose without theatricality. The consistency of this phrase across years serves as an entry point into her embodied, practiced mode of retelling.

Figure 1 presents a comparative spectrographic visualisation of Godin's opening phrase – "*I'm not a speaker, or a teacher, or a lecturer*" – across four monologue years (2002, 2005, 2007, 2009):

While all 4 years exhibit strong structural consistency, two distinct pairings emerge. The waveforms from 2002 to 2007 align closely, revealing nearly identical patterns of

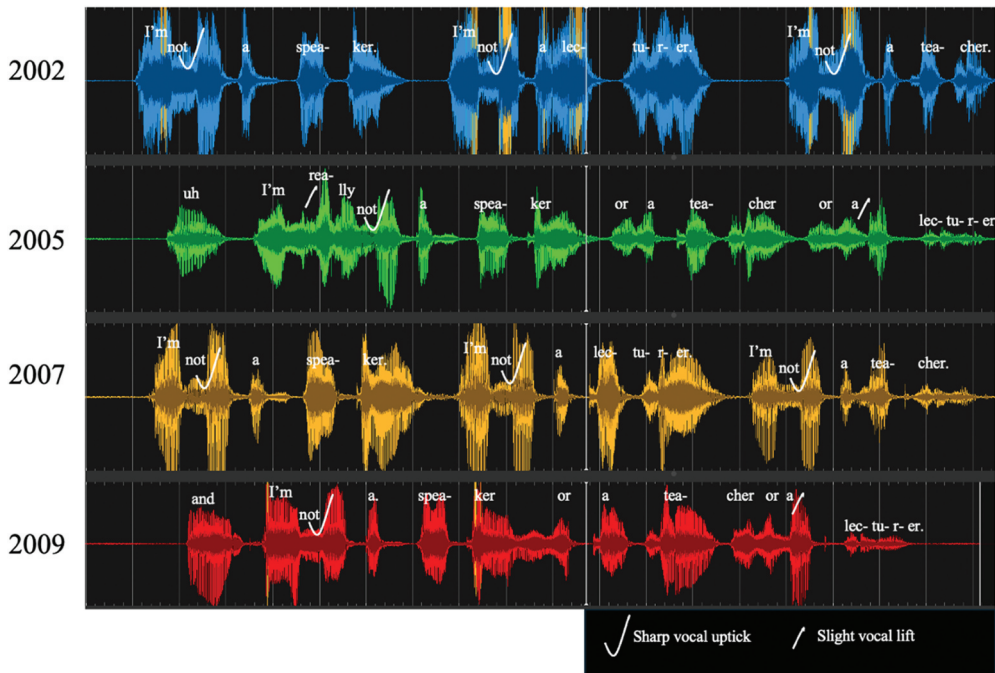


Figure 1. Distant listening of Godin's opening monologue, 2002, 2005, 2007 and 2009.

pacing, articulation and vocal stress – particularly in the consistent upticks on “not”, “speak-” and “teach-”. Similarly, 2005 and 2009 form a second pairing, both marked by a slightly more informal delivery: added prefaces such as “uh” or “and”, smoother transitions, and less sharply articulated upticks on key nouns. These paired spectrograms reflect how Godin’s monologue remained strikingly stable, even as subtle shifts in delivery – through breath, tone and phrasing – signalled micro-adjustments across years. Overall, [Figure 1](#) reinforces how her vocal introduction functioned as a rehearsed entry point: assertive, ritualised and calibrated for both personal expression and audience reception.

To further trace these shifts, [Table 1](#) compiles the full transcripts of Godin’s opening remarks from each of her monologue-format *First Person* sessions (2002–2003, 2005–2009; all transcriptions done by the author).

Although the structural refrain, “*I’m not a speaker, I’m not a teacher, I’m not a lecturer.*

What I am is a survivor of the Holocaust”, remains largely intact, the surrounding phrasing reveals meaningful variations. These deviations often register in the form of dedications, acknowledgements of friends or USHMM staff, or clarifications about her name. While small, these changes signal a gradual deepening of relational ties and a greater ease with her setting, the institutional environment.

Among these, 2006 stands out. It is the only monologue in which Godin stutters – a momentary break in her otherwise confident cadence – as she attempts to deliver the line: “*Maybe you expected a – a speaker, a teacher. . .*” The stutter alone marks a vocal and emotional deviation, but the year’s context deepens its impact: 2006’s *First Person* session fell on what would have been her mother’s birthday. Godin departs from her usual rhythm to dedicate the retelling in her mother’s memory, noting her survival and explicitly

Table 1. Nesse Godin, “opening” transcriptions from 2002–2003; 2005–2009.

Year	Transcription	Testimonial Format
2002	Good afternoon, you all heard my name is Nesse Godin, I don't know, maybe some of you thought that you were coming to listen to a speaker. I'm not a speaker, I'm not a lecturer, I'm not a teacher. What I am, is a survivor of the Holocaust.	monologue
2003	Thank you, Chris, very much. Good afternoon, you heard my name is Nesse Godin. I don't know what you were told, maybe you heard that you were getting a speaker today, I'm not a speaker. I'm not a speaker, I'm not a teacher, I'm not a lecturer. What I am is a survivor of the Holocaust.	monologue
2004	<i>No monologue</i>	“1-on-1”
2005	Thank you very much Dr. Meineke for such a nice introduction, my dear friend it's always a pleasure to be with you. Ah, you heard My name is Nesse Godin, my name used to be Nessa and I'm very proud that Dr. Meineke introduced me with my real name. Ah, I'm really not a speaker, or a teacher, or a lecturer. What I am is a survivor of the Holocaust.	monologue
2006	First of all, I'd like to that you all for being here, there are some special friends, fellow survivors, leadership, Mr. Meineke, and my friend, John Monique, who came especially to be here with me, give me support. Also, I'd like to dedicate this presentation in memory and honor of my mother who survived the Holocaust and today would have been her birthday, March 15 th . I don't know what you were told, what it said on the program. Maybe you expected a [stutter] a—a speaker, a teacher, I'm none of those, I'm a survivor of the Holocaust.	monologue
2007	Thank you, Anne, for such a nice introduction. Welcome everybody, you just heard all kinds of fancy stuff about me, the truth of the matter is, I'm not a speaker, I'm not a teacher, I'm not a lecturer. What I am is a survivor of the Holocaust.	monologue
2008	Thank you very much, Anne. I'd like to greet you all. I really appreciate to see many of my friends here that came from clo-far and from not so far away made special to be here, Jan especially you for being here today. You just heard about the <i>First Person</i> . Who are we? We are not speakers, we are not teachers, we are not lecturers. What we are, are survivors of the Holocaust.	monologue
2009	Thank you, Anne, very much, welcome everybody, you heard by name is Nesse Godin, and I'm not a speaker, or a teacher, or a lecturer, what I am is a survivor of the Holocaust.	monologue

naming the date: March 15th. She also names several close friends in attendance and thanks them for their support.

This is the only *First Person* appearance Godin frames her retelling as a commemorative offering. The presence of fellow survivors and the invocation of familial memory collapse temporal distance between past and present, personal grief and public remembrance. In this moment, the testimonial space becomes both a ritual and a relational act – revealing not only Godin's performative stability, but also the fluidity of her emotional register when conditions invite deeper vulnerability.

Beginning in 2011, Godin transitions fully to the one-on-one interview format, and her previously consistent opening monologue disappears. From 2011 to 2017, her conversational introductions become notably fluid, with significant narrative variation across sessions. Table 2 compiles these opening segments, with italicised text indicating the voice of interviewer Patricia Haber Rice.

Upon reviewing the transcriptions alone, three primary shifts emerge: First, in 2011 and 2012, Godin's opening centres on her family, often accompanied by references to photographs she shares with the audience; second, in 2013 and 2014, this familial focus remains but is now preceded by a newly emphasised claim that prewar Lithuania was a democratic society where individuals of all religions and races could live freely; and third from 2015 to 2017, her introduction shifts more dramatically: rather than beginning with her own family, Godin opens with what she frames as a historical account of how Jews first arrived in Lithuania – stating that they were invited by King Vytautas.⁹

Table 2. Godin opening segments, 2011–2017.

Year	Transcription	Testimonial Format
2011	<i>Thank you Nesse for being willing to share your experiences with us today. I'm going to let you get organized. First, to start the interview why don't you tell us about what your experiences were before the war in Lithuania?</i> Yes, as you could all see, in the pictures, I had a lovely family, my parents, two brothers.	1-on-1
2012	<i>Nesse thank you for coming here and willing to share your first person experience with us. Maybe you could begin by telling us a little bit about your experiences in Lithuania before the war began?</i> I grew up in Lithuania when Lithuania was a democracy. Many times, people think we come from villages. You saw a picture of my family . . . we lived in a town. We were not farmers. I went to school, to Hebrew day school.	1-on-1
2013	<i>Okay Nesse, before you begin, you're going to get out your photographs here for all of us to see. And, as we begin could you tell us about your life in Lithuania before the world war began, the second world war. What was it like to be a child in Lithuania in that time?</i> Well, Lithuania was a democracy where all the people, people of every race, of every religion, live freely together.	1-on-1
2014	<i>Thank you for joining us today Nesse and for sharing your experiences with us. Could you perhaps begin by describing your experiences as a young girl in Lithuania before the war years?</i> As you saw in the picture, my family, a normal life in Lithuania. Lithuania was a democracy between the first world war and the second. The Soviet Union had it in 1940, but otherwise all the people of every race and every religion lived freely together . . .	1-on-1
2015	<i>Okay, thank you for joining us today, Nesse, Ms. Godin. Before we begin kind of talking about your Holocaust experiences, can you tell us what it was like to live in Siauliai, Lithuania before the war with your family, your brothers, your parents?</i> Well, I grew up in Siauliai, Lithuania, actually Jewish people were invited by King Vytautas to come to Lithuania after the terrible things that happened in Spain to come and to teach the Lithuanians trades. Because they were mostly farmers.	1-on-1
2016	<i>Thank you Nesse for being willing for sharing your first person experience with us today . . . could you tell us what it was like when you were a young girl growing up before the war years in Lithuania, in Siauliai?</i> Yes, uh, Jewish people lived in Lithuania for many, many years. In the five hundreds, the King Vytautas invited Jewish people to come because Lithuanians were mostly farmers and they wanted to learn trades and businesses, so that's, it shows in Lithuanian history. So, when I grew up in Lithuania, in Siauliai, we had a normal life, until you know.	1-on-1
2017	<i>Thank you, thank you for joining us today, Nesse, it's always a pleasure to be with you. We're a team, right?</i> That's right. <i>So, do you want to start first by telling me what life was like before World War II broke out in Lithuania? Can you tell us a little bit about what your family did? How old you were?</i> Well, I tell you. Um, Lithuania, Jewish people were invited to be there by one of the kings. Because Lithuanian people were mostly farmers. So . . . Vytautas, that was his name, he started to invite Jewish people. And Jewish people came, and some were from other areas.	1-on-1

Unlike the spectral consistency observed in Godin's 2002–2009 openings, a distant listening analysis of her 2011–2017 testimonies proves less effective for longitudinal comparison. The variability in her conversational framing, both in content and delivery, resists the kind of spectral overlay or segmental alignment that makes distant listening a productive tool in earlier years. While computational tools can still reveal pitch shifts or vocal fatigue across this period, the lack of a repeated narrative anchor, such as the monologue's consistent phrasing, means that any sonic comparison would be more fragmented and less revealing of broader testimonial patterns. In this later stage, close listening becomes the more generative mode of analysis, attuned to the relational dynamics between Godin and her interviewer, the shifts in emotional emphasis and the subtle reordering of memory within a more dialogic format.

Through the combined methods of distant and close listening, Godin's opening reveals both remarkable stability and subtle transformation across time. Spectral analysis confirms a high degree of vocal and narrative consistency during the programme's early years

(2002–2006), while also capturing the gradual shifts that accompany her growing ease within the testimonial environment and her evolving relationship with museum staff and the programme itself. These early monologues provide a longitudinal case of near-identical testimonial framing, while her eventual transition to the one-on-one demonstrates how testimonial form can both shape and be shaped by the emotional and sonic contours of memory work.

This emotional texture becomes even more pronounced when we turn to Godin's second moment, when she recounts the death of her father, an event that remains consistent in wording across the years, but not in tone.

Godin, moment 2—father's death

In every one of her *First Person* appearances, Godin recounts the murder of her father – a moment that consistently surfaces around the midpoint of her narrative. During her monologue-format years, this memory emerges with an almost liturgical cadence: *"I don't ask a question about millions. Millions is a very big number. I ask a question about one human being. My dad"*. Through this refrain, Godin resists the abstraction of mass death, reclaiming grief through singularity. Her rhetorical move from numerical scale to intimate loss anchors the enormity of the Holocaust in embodied, personal memory. The delivery – punctuated by breath-held pauses and aching repetition – sonically enacts the impossibility of closure, particularly in the recurring line, *"He was a kind man . . . why was he killed?"*

When she shifts to her one-on-one conversations this remains, but only for 2 years, and in 2013, a subtle transformation takes hold. Her affect remains, the grief never recedes, but it is joined by a quiet, almost logical framing. The rhetorical question of *why* yields to a form of historical reasoning: her father, she begins to explain, was strong, healthy and, therefore, seen as a threat. He might fight back. In this reframing, Godin does not excuse or rationalise the horror – rather, she begins to articulate the ideological mechanisms behind it. Her voice steadies: her delivery becomes less searching, more declarative. The injustice remains, but it is no longer unknowable.

One year stands out: 2009. That year, John Demjanjuk, a Nazi camp guard, was extradited to Germany at the age of 89.¹⁰ In her testimony that same year, Godin opens this memory with a marked shift: *"My father didn't live to be 89"*. It is a quiet but searing juxtaposition, linking private loss to contemporary justice, and foregrounding a moral asymmetry that still reverberates. But by 2017, the waveform flattens considerably. The once-dynamic cadence gives way to long stretches of near-silence, punctuated by brief vocal engagement. This is not a stylistic shift but a symptomatic one: in this final recording, Godin falters. Her memory stumbles, her articulation wavers, and the narrative drifts, requiring interviewer Patricia-Haber Rice to gently intervene and re-anchor her in key details of her story. Close listening clarifies this distinction: in 2017, long inhalations precede speech, silences stretch and the rhythm falters – not due to detachment, but to cognitive and physical labour. These microtemporal cues – the gasp, the falter, the lengthened silence before a name, signal the cost of memory in the ageing body. [Table 3](#) provides the narratives transcriptions of each "my dad" retelling by Godin.

As the preceding close listening makes clear, Godin's vocal delivery – especially in the naming of her father – reveals the unresolved texture of her grief through breath, pitch and rhythmic disruption. But to assess how this emotional intensity sustains (or shifts)

Table 3. Nesse Godin, “my dad” transcriptions 2002–2009; 2011–2017.

Year	Transcription <i>Italicized words indicate interviewer Patricia Haber-Rice.</i>	Testimonial Format
2002	My dear friends, on that selection, I lost my father, he was 47 years old. I don't ask a question about millions. Millions is a very big number. I ask a question about one human being. My dad, he was a kind man, he didn't rob, he didn't kill, he didn't insult anybody. Why was he killed? He was killed because of that evil that was allowed in humanity.	monologue
2003	My dear friends on that selection I lost my father. He was 47 years old. You know, I sit many times in the audience, and we have the most wonderful lectures, we have professors speaking from this podium, and I hear them discuss about how many millions were killed in the Holocaust. I don't ask a question about millions. I ask a question about one single human being. My dad. He was a kind man. He was a good guy, he didn't steal, he didn't rob. Why was he killed? Because of that evil that was allowed in humanity.	monologue
2004	My dear wonderful people, my dear wonderful friends in the audience, this day I lost my father. He was 47 years old. I don't ask questions about millions, millions is a big number. One human being, my dad, he was a good guy, you saw his picture, kind beautiful man. Why was he killed? He was killed because of that evil that was allowed in humanity.	“1-on-1”
2005	My dear friends, on that selection, I lost my dear father. He was 47 years old. I don't ask a question about millions. I ask a question about one single human being. My dad. He was a good guy, he didn't steal, he didn't rob. He was a loving man. Why did they kill him? Because of the evil that was allowed in humanity.	monologue
2006	My dear friends, on that selection I lost my father. He was 47 years old. I don't ask a question about millions. I ask a question about one single human being. My father he was a good guy. He was a kind man. He didn't rob, he didn't kill, he was loving. He was killed because that evil the Holocaust was allowed in humanity.	monologue
2007	My dear friends, on that selection, I lost my father. He was 47 years old. I don't ask a question about millions. I ask a question about one single human being. He was a good guy. He was kind. He was gentle. Why was he killed? Because of the Holocaust that was allowed in humanity.	monologue
2008	My dear friends on that selection I lost my father. He was 47 years old. I don't ask a question about millions. I ask a question about one single human being. My dad. Why did. He was a kind man, a good man. A generous man. He was killed because of that evil, the Holocaust that was allowed in humanity.	monologue
2009	My father didn't live to be 89. He was 47 when was taken that day from the ghetto of Siauliai, Lithuania. I didn't ask a question about thousands of people, millions of people. I ask a question about one human being. My dad. He was a kind man; he was a good man. Why was he killed? He was killed because the world was silent while people were being murdered.	monologue
2011	My dear friends, I don't ask a question about millions. I ask a question about one human being that was killed. He was 47 years old. That was his day off from work. Why did they kill him?	1-on-1
2012	My dear friends, on that selection, I lost my father. He was 47 years old. He was among the strong and the healthy. Why was he killed? Because of that evil that was allowed in humanity.	1-on-1
2013	My dear friends, on that selection I lost my father. That was his day off. He was killed because he was too strong. He may fight them back.	1-on-1
2014	On that selection I lost my father. He was 47 years old. He was killed because the Nazis thought he may fight them back.	1-on-1
2015	My dear friends, on that selection I lost my father. Tall, healthy, beautiful man. Why was he killed? Because the Nazis thought he may fight them back.	1-on-1
2016	On that selection I lost my father. He was one of the healthy strong. His day off from work, he happened to be in the ghetto.	1-on-1
2017	***Among them were healthy, and strong, and children, and sick, because you see the healthy and strong the Nazis wanted to kill because they shouldn't fight them back. Among them was my father. They were taken—we found out after the war. That they were taken to Auschwitz concentration camp where they were killed in the gas chambers. <i>And that was the so-called kinder action, the so-called child action-uh- in 1943 that you lost your father.</i> Yes, that was called the kinderaktion . . . but that was named the kinderaktion because you know mostly were children and elderly and children and healthy and strong like my father. <i>But your father happened to be home that day that was the day his day off from work and he was caught up in the killing.</i>	1-on-1

over time, we must also step back. Distant listening, while less intimate, offers a broader lens: it allows us to trace sonic consistencies across years, identifying repeated vocal patterns that might otherwise go unnoticed. The phrase “*I lost my father*”, for instance, is delivered with a consistent downward inflection across nearly every year of Godin’s *First Person* participation, a visual marker of grief that holds even as tone, tempo or surrounding narrative evolves. In this way, distant listening does not replace close listening – it amplifies its findings, demonstrating how trauma resounds not only in singular moments, but across the arc of a longitudinal archive.

Figure 2 compares Godin’s retelling of her father’s murder in 2002 (red) and 2013 (blue), revealing striking vocal consistency across more than a decade:

Both waveforms begin with the same measured cadence—“*my dear friends*”—delivered with near-identical rhythmic structure and a subtle vocal lift on “*friends*”, indicating the habitual nature of her testimonial entry point. The phrase “*on that selection*” follows with the same sharp vocal uptick on “*that*”, underscoring its emotional charge. Yet it is in the final phrase—“*I lost my father*”—where the greatest affective resonance emerges. Both years show a marked vocal downfall on “*father*”, visually conveying the weight of loss. This downward inflection suggests that, despite the structural repetition, the emotional impact of this memory remains raw, embodied through her voice.

Further distant listening analyses reveal that each time Godin utters the phrase “*I lost my father*” in her retellings, it is accompanied by a consistent downward vocal inflection. This vocal pattern appears across numerous years—2002, 2003, 2004, 2005 (with a slight variation: “*I lost my dear father*”), 2006, 2007, 2008, 2012, 2013, 2015 and 2016. To illustrate this consistency, I include spectrographic visuals from five representative years in **Figure 3**: 2002, 2006, 2007, 2013 and 2015:

Taken together, these moments – her ritualised openings and the evolving recounting of her father’s death – reveal the testimonial arc of Nesse Godin not

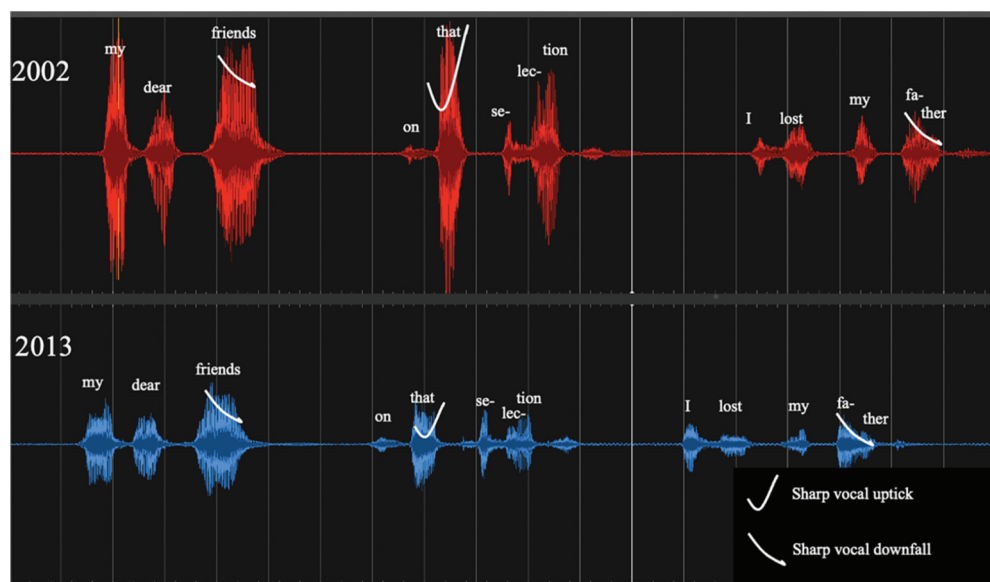


Figure 2. Distant listening, Godin “*I lost my father*”, 2002 vs. 2013.

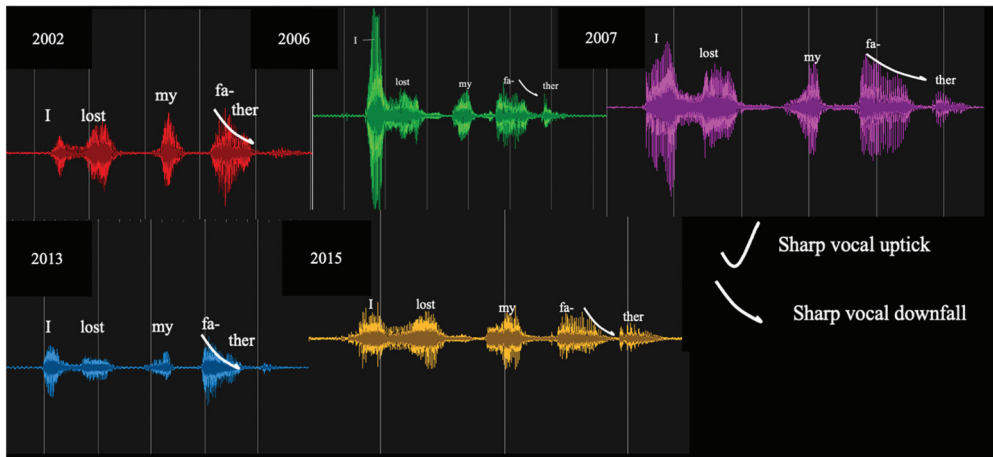


Figure 3. Distant listening, Godin, “I lost my father”, 2002, 2006, 2007, 2013 and 2015.

as static repetition but as a dynamic interplay of memory, emotion and form. Through longitudinal analysis, we witness how even the most consistent refrains accrue new inflection, how vocal steadiness can coexist with emotional volatility, and how relational and institutional environments shape the telling of trauma. Close listening captures the grain of grief; distant listening traces its echoes over time. Godin’s voice – sometimes faltering, sometimes fierce – reminds us that testimony is not a single act but a durational process, one in which meaning is continually revoiced, reframed and re-embodied.

Fritz Gluckstein

While Nesse Godin exemplifies how a survivor might revise or reframe their emotional engagement with certain memories over time, Fritz Gluckstein (1927–2021) offers a counterpoint through the remarkable consistency of his narrative. Across his *First Person* conversations, his retellings remain nearly identical in content yet vary in tonal delivery. Interestingly, one moment in Gluckstein’s narrative reflects the natural effects of ageing in his voice, particularly when he recites and embodies his father’s words.

This dynamic becomes especially evident when examining Gluckstein’s eighteen appearances in *First Person* between 2002 and 2019, capturing his voice over nearly two decades, from the age of 74 to 91.¹¹ While the narrative structure remains consistent, subtle variations in tone, pacing and particular word emphasis reflect both the physiological ageing of his voice and a growing authority in his delivery. His style is composed and deliberate, often characterised by quiet precision, but it also gains emotional depth over time. In this way, Gluckstein’s testimony exemplifies how narrative stability and vocal transformation can coexist, revealing not only the endurance of memory but also the evolving nature of its expression.

“My father lost his job”

Gluckstein’s moment recounts the day in 1933 when his father was forced to resign from his civil service position. According to Gluckstein, his father had gone to work as usual but was told he was no longer needed and was asked to leave through the back door due to a Nazi demonstration taking place at the front. Recalling his father, Gluckstein recounts his response: “No, I came in through the front door and I go out through the front door”.

Across his eighteen *First Person* retellings, Gluckstein consistently delivers this line with vocal emphasis on the words “said”, “no”, “in”, and “leave”. Notably, “said” is delivered with a sharper, more percussive articulation than the rest, functioning almost like a cue that marks the beginning of quotation. Following this, there is a slight vocal downtick after “no”, which softens the refusal while also imbuing it with gravity – as if invoking not only the memory but the presence of his father. These emphases are not arbitrary. They are rhetorically charged: “said” signals the shift to reported speech; “no” marks defiance; and “in” and “leave” delineate moral and spatial boundaries. While there are slight narrative variations over the years, as detailed in Table 4 (where bolded text indicates emphasis), Gluckstein’s stress on the words “said”, “in”, and “leave” remains consistent from 2002 and again in 2004 and 2006. From 2007 through 2019, the emphasis on “no” is largely absent – apart from a return in 2012 and 2019. In many of the intervening years, Gluckstein appears to shift the third point of emphasis to the word “and”, just before the phrase “and I’m going to leave by the front door”. Still, “in” and “leave” remain the most consistently emphasised words across all eighteen retellings.

Based on both close listening and my conversations with Gluckstein, I read this moment not simply as a recollection of an event, but as a vocal channelling of how his father used to tell the story. In this sense, the line contains more than Gluckstein’s own voice – it resonates as an echo of his father’s. While his father would have originally spoken in German, and we cannot know the exact phrasing, a sentence such as “*Nein, ich bin durch die Vordertür gekommen und werde auch durch die Vordertür gehen*” would carry a similar cadence and assertiveness. The emphasis on “Nein” (no), “durch” (through), and

Table 4. Fritz Gluckstein, “father’s last day at work” transcriptions 2002; 2004–2019 (all 1-on-1 testimonial format).

Year	Transcription
2002	He said no , I came in by the front door, and I’m going to leave by the front door.
2004	No . I came in the front door, and I go out the front door.
2005	But my father said, I came in by the front door, and I will leave by the front door.
2006	No . I came in by the front door and I will leave by the front door.
2007	Well, said my father, I came in by the front door, and I will leave by the front door .
2008	My father said I came in by the front door and I’ll be leaving by the front door. And so he did.
2009	Well, said my father, I came in by the front door, and I’ll leave by the front door.
2010	Well, said my father, I came in by the front door, and I’m going to leave by the front door.
2011	Well, said my father, I came in by the front door. I will leave by the front door.
2012	No , said my father, I came in by the front door and I leave by the front door.
2013	Well, said my father, I came in by the front door, and I’m going to leave by the front door.
2014	Said my father, I came in by the front door and I go out by the front door.
2015	Well, my father said, I came in by the front door and I will leave by the front door.
2016	Said my father, I came in through the front, and I leave through the front.
2017	My father said, I came in by the front door and I’ll be leaving by the front door.
2018	Said my father, I came in by the front door and I’ll be leaving by the front door.
2019	My father said No , I came in by the front door and I will leave by the front door.

bolded text is focused moment.

“auch” (also) suggests that the emotional rhythm of the line transcends linguistic boundaries, preserving the affective force of the original telling.

This layering of voices – his father’s embodied through Fritz’s own – enacts a sort of tension between continuity and loss that Greenspan identifies as central to survivor testimony: the simultaneous preservation of memory’s origin and the inevitable erosion introduced through its retelling (Greenspan 2010, 78). The phrase endures, stable in wording yet increasingly textured by the ageing vocal body that carries it. In Gluckstein’s delivery, the line is not merely repeated; it is reanimated. Each retelling preserves not only what was said, but how it was said, and by whom – bridging the historical moment of his father’s defiance with the present-day act of bearing witness. The stability of the phrase contrasts with the vulnerability of the voice that delivers it, revealing how memory is both anchored in origin and shaped by the conditions of its reappearance. It is precisely this friction – between the fixed and the faltering, between inherited language and the ageing voice – that gives the moment its emotional force and historical weight.

That the same words—*“No”*, *“in”*, and *“leave”*—are emphasised across nearly two decades is significant. These vocal patterns function as anchors of resistance. In channeling his father’s voice, Gluckstein is not merely preserving the content of a moment – he is performing its ethical stance. The repetition of this phrase across years, unchanged in structure yet increasingly marked by the tremble or strength of ageing, projects a transgenerational resistance forward in time. It captures how testimony can function simultaneously as memory, embodiment and moral insistence.

When shifting to a distant listening of this moment, I selected five of his 18 retellings which I deemed from close listening were best reflecting of shifts in his ageing voice: 2002, 2007, 2012, 2015, 2019. Notably, the emphatic words within Gluckstein’s retelling remain consistent across nearly two decades; it is not the content or rhetorical structure that shifts, but rather the pacing of his delivery. In a longitudinal study of Holocaust memory, this distinction is crucial: it reveals how the embodied ageing process affects not what is remembered, but how it is communicated. The slowing tempo, extended pauses

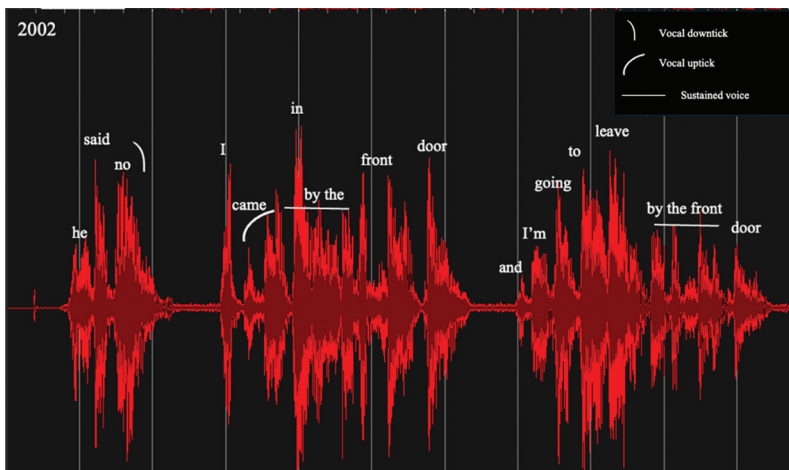


Figure 4. Gluckstein (2002) *“No”*.

and changes in breathwork reflect the wear of time on the voice, even as the narrative itself remains steady.

Figure 4's spectrogram captures Gluckstein's (2002) retelling of his father's words: "*He said no, I came in by the front door and I'm going to leave by the front door.*" This delivery is notably brisk, lasting only 4 s, with "in" and "leave" emerging as the most distinctly articulated, visually identifiable by their pronounced sonic peaks:

Gluckstein's (2007) retelling stands out as an anomaly within the broader arc of his *First Person* narratives. It is the only instance in which the host, Bill Benson, must prompt him to include this part of the story – suggesting a momentary lapse or narrative disruption. As a result, the delivery is notably different: slower, more sustained and markedly flatter in tone compared to other years. Figure 5 captures this altered vocal profile.

The spectrogram shows a more monotone pattern, with evenly weighted emphasis on the words "well", "said", "I", "in", "leave", and "door". Unlike previous or later versions where emphasis heightens emotional or moral stakes, here the equal stress across words contributes to a measured, almost mechanical cadence. The deviation in both delivery and structure suggests a momentary distancing – perhaps cognitive or emotional – before Gluckstein re-centres himself within the familiar rhythm of the story in later years.

2012 marks the first year in which Gluckstein's ageing voice becomes distinctly perceptible – not through slower pacing, but through a reallocation of vocal energy. As shown in Figure 6, the overall duration of the phrase remains nearly identical to that of 2002 (just under 4 s), yet the delivery feels markedly different. While "no", "in", and "leave" are still emphasised, they are less forceful, and the intervening words – such as "said my father" and "by the front door"—are sustained with greater evenness and vocal control. This produces a smoother, more continuous waveform, suggesting not a weakening of memory but an adjustment in vocal technique – perhaps to preserve coherence and clarity as physical vocal capacity changes.

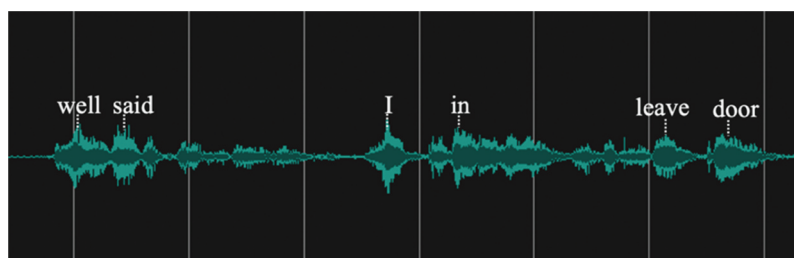


Figure 5. Gluckstein (2007) "no".

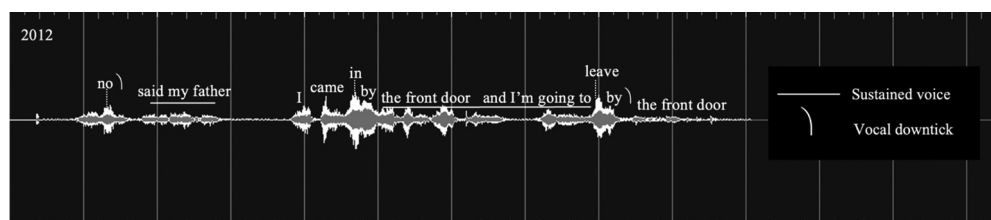


Figure 6. Figure, Gluckstein "no" 2012.

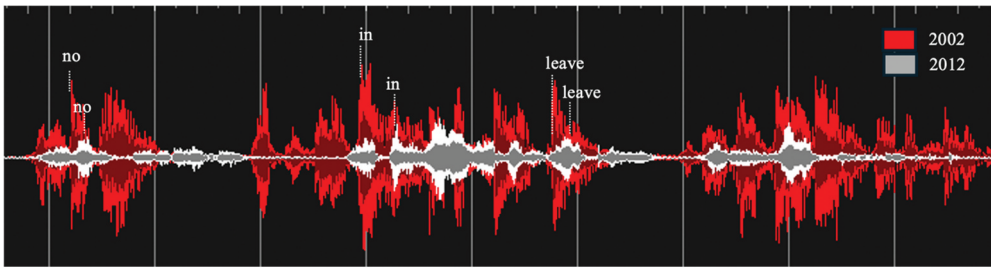


Figure 7. Gluckstein “no” 2002 vs. 2012.

Figure 7 visually illuminates the shift in vocal energy between Gluckstein’s (2002) (red) and 2012 (grey) retellings of the same narrative moment.

While both follow the same general vocal arc – rising and falling at similar points in the phrase – the dynamic contrast between them is notably different. The 2002 delivery is marked by sharper peaks and more pronounced articulation around words like “said”, “in”, and “leave”, conveying vocal urgency and assertiveness. In contrast, the 2012 waveform reveals a more evenly distributed energy pattern, with softened peaks and smoother transitions between words. This contrast suggests not a slowing of speech, but an adaptation in vocal delivery: a more measured, sustained performance shaped by ageing breathwork and physical control. The affective and rhetorical shape of the memory remains intact, even as the body delivering it changes.

This more measured vocal profile remains consistent through 2019, with minimal variation. As shown in **Figure 8**, Gluckstein’s (2015) retelling (blue) closely mirrors the 2012 delivery (grey) in pacing, sustain and overall vocal arc.

The primary difference lies in the sharper, more forceful articulation of the word “leave”, which registers as a pronounced peak in the 2015 waveform. This brief intensification suggests a momentary return to a more emphatic register, reinforcing the moral and spatial weight of the word without disrupting the otherwise steady cadence that characterises his later years of testimony.

2019 marks Gluckstein’s final *First Person* conversation, and with it, a notable shift in vocal delivery. His retelling extends from the consistent four-second duration observed in previous years to 6 s. While the familiar emphatic words—“no”, “in”, and “leave”—are still present, their articulation changes. In this version, each of these words is initially accented, but followed by an extended vocal downtick, which contributes to the slower overall phrasing. This visualisation is depicted in **Figure 9**. This lengthening reflects not a loss of clarity, but a deeper inflection shaped by age. The rest of the phrase retains the sustained

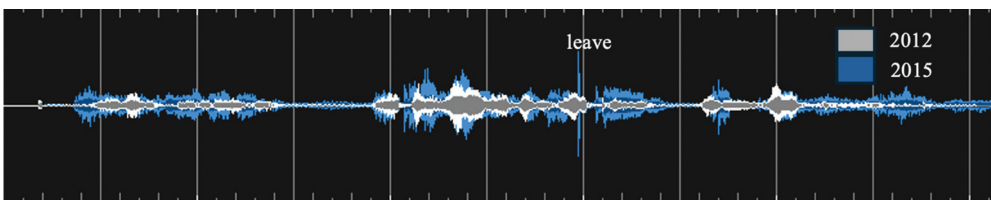


Figure 8. Gluckstein “no” 2012 vs. 2015.

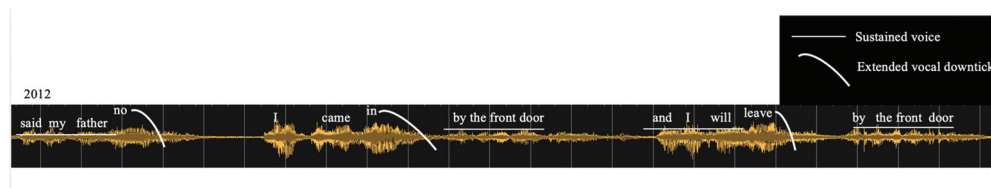


Figure 9. Gluckstein “no” 2019.

vocal style heard in earlier years, suggesting a continuity in delivery even as subtle shifts in prosody signal the body’s temporal arc.

Taken together, Gluckstein’s vocal trajectory across nearly two decades demonstrates the unique affordances of a longitudinal archive for Holocaust testimony. While traditional, standalone interviews capture testimony as a fixed moment in time, the *First Person* programme reveals testimony as a living, embodied practice—one that evolves with the survivor’s ageing voice, shifting emotional access and changing relational context. The consistent narrative structure in Gluckstein’s account offers an anchor, but it is through the subtle modulations of voice – his pauses, emphases, breathwork and tonal control – that we witness memory’s endurance and vulnerability in equal measure. What emerges is not simply a repetition of content, but a slow unfolding of testimony’s sonic dimensions. A longitudinal archive thus enables us to hear how memory is not just spoken, but continually shaped by the passage of time, by the survivor’s body, and by the dialogic conditions of retelling. In Gluckstein’s case, this underscores how Holocaust testimony is not merely preserved in words but also carried in – and altered by – the voice that bears it.

Conclusion

This article has presented *First Person* not in opposition to other Holocaust testimony archives, but as a distinct case study that foregrounds the affordances of sonic and longitudinal listening when testimonial conditions remain remarkably stable. Drawing on methods from voice studies, sound studies and digital humanities, this study has analysed how Holocaust survivor voices transform over time – vocally, emotionally and relationally. By combining close with distant listening, it traces the evolving testimonial presence of across repeated acts of narration.

Rather than repeating their stories in rote fashion, both survivors return to them in dynamic ways, negotiating memory through the body and through voice. As Henry Greenspan reminds us, testimony is not a static record but a dialogic process, and the vocal trace – inflected by ageing, hesitation and relational shifts – is a central medium of that process (Greenspan 2010). *First Person*, with its institutional consistency and annual cadence, offers an especially rich yet understudied opportunity to examine shifts in survivor voice through longitudinal vocal analysis. As noted in the introduction, this relative neglect may stem from disciplinary tendencies to privilege archived, fixed forms of testimony over dialogic, performance-oriented formats. As Aleida Assmann argues, archives have historically been constructed for preservation, not performance – leaving public programmes like *First Person* at the margins of both Holocaust and archival studies.

While Presner has articulated a compelling framework for ethically attuned distant listening, and early efforts like David Boder's post-war recordings laid the groundwork for sonic approaches to testimony, few studies have engaged sustained, longitudinal analysis of survivor voice across time. This absence is telling: Holocaust studies has long prioritised the visual and textual, often overlooking the *affective* sonic – even as the voice remains one of the most emotively charged and revealing carriers of memory.

Further, this study is motivated by what Presner calls an “ethics of an algorithm”, which underscores the need for methodologies that are both analytically rigorous and ethically responsive approaches that embrace computational tools without losing sight of the human subject.¹² This article responds to that call by exploring how algorithmically guided listening can help surface nuanced patterns in testimonial delivery while remaining attuned to the relational and emotional dimensions embedded in the voice. In doing so, it argues not only for the inclusion of sonic methods in Holocaust studies, but for their critical role in expanding how we hear, interpret and engage with survivor memory.

Many aspects of the testimonies of Godin and Gluckstein remain outside the scope of this article. This study has intentionally focused on a narrow set of moments to model a new mode of sonic inquiry. Yet further research might expand into areas such as accent, linguistic code-switching or inflection patterns shaped by language politics and diaspora. Computational tools such as harmonic tracking and resonance mapping could offer additional layers of insight into how the voice – both as sound and as signal – changes across decades.

Future studies should also take seriously the role of gender in shaping testimonial delivery and reception. As Miriam Ringelheim has argued, women's testimonies are often mediated through gendered expectations about emotional expression, narrative structure and audience engagement.¹³ These dynamics may influence not only the content of testimony but also its sonic and affective textures, particularly in public, institutional settings like *First Person*.

The *First Person* archive, with over 900 h of recorded interviews, is uniquely positioned to support such inquiries. In contrast to more heterogeneous archives, its structured format and recurring hosts create an unusually stable testimonial environment, allowing researchers to isolate how survivor voice shifts independently of drastic changes in setting. It is surprising that this resource remains underexamined within both Holocaust and sound studies. Similar testimonial programmes likely exist in museums, synagogues and community centres around the world, but they remain largely undocumented and unanalysed.

Ultimately, what this article offers is not a conclusion but an invitation. By centring voice as a dynamic, ageing, gendered and relational medium of Holocaust memory, it urges scholars to reconsider how we hear and interpret testimony. Longitudinal listening reminds us that survivor voices are not frozen in time. They tremble, deepen, soften and sometimes harden. And in that motion, we are asked not only to hear the story – but to listen to its changing form.

Notes

1. Kathryn Huether, interview with Bill Benson, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 24 July, 2019. Benson credited Natalie Birk, then Director of Public Programs, with originating

the *First Person* concept and inviting him to serve as its host. Reflecting on his role, Benson described the importance of guided dialogue: “I want the audience to really feel this. The raw information makes you feel it, but then you layer on top of that how people felt – that’s what I can add”. He emphasised the emotional depth that comes from sustained relationships with survivors over time, noting, for example, that Fritz Gluckstein appeared on the program ten times and Michel Margosis nearly eighteen. “I could almost do it without notes”, he said of some return participants, highlighting how the longitudinal format allows for deeper, more nuanced explorations of testimony. This recurrent structure, he argued, enables both survivor and audience to revisit the past in evolving ways.

2. The Yale Fortunoff Archive, the USC Shoah Foundation Archive, and the USHMM’s Oral History Department constitute the three most prominent Holocaust oral history collections in the United States. As Holocaust historian Noah Shenker has observed, these institutions each developed their own approaches to testimony collection and dissemination, shaped by distinct institutional contexts, even as their methods and missions have occasionally overlapped. See Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimonies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2015).
3. As summarised by Dana DeVlieger, music theorist and IP litigation attorney, interview with the author, 23 July, 2024.
4. Boder is quoted here in the form presented by Presner. See Todd Presner, *Ethics of the Algorithm* (2024), 8.
5. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006, 288;) Eichmann’s disclosures about Nazi atrocities were ignored, and the trial failed to show how, or if, the law could suitably punish someone accountable for unprecedented industrial-scale murder. Consequently, the trial failed to establish a coherent relationship between law and judgement, as it misunderstood the criminal essence of Eichmann’s actions.
6. Presner further conceptualises “distant listening” as a mode of computational interpretation that resists abstraction by centring the singularity of the voice. Rather than using algorithmic tools to generalise or depersonalise testimony, he argues that such technologies can be mobilised ethically – to enhance our capacity as distant witnesses, attuning us to vocal nuance, affective shifts, and patterns otherwise imperceptible. This framework is particularly useful to my analysis, which treats spectrograms, pitch contours, and waveform data not as empirical endpoints but as interpretive lenses – tools that amplify what is already present in the voice. Presner’s model invites us to understand computational outputs as a way of listening *with* survivors, not just about them, opening space for empathy and relational understanding across time, form, and technological mediation. Presner, *Ethics*, 203.
7. In a personal email exchange (25 April 2025), Henry Greenspan clarified aspects of his approach to paired and dialogic interviews, emphasising his commitment to allowing survivors to “set the stage” according to their own needs and preferences. He noted that contextual elements – such as who is present or absent – form an integral part of the retelling and, while not always immediately interpretable, often gain significance over time. Greenspan contrasted this with more structured formats like *First Person*, where such flexibility is limited. He also reflected on the often-overlooked intentionality behind vocal delivery, noting that many survivors are acutely aware of their use of inflection, cadence, and emphasis. “We usually assume that voice ‘simply happens’”, he wrote, “but over time, it is surprising how much one can learn by attending to its variations across listeners and circumstances”.
8. Godin’s 2002–2009 and 2011–2017 programs are accessible to the public in either audio or video format on USHMM’s website. See <https://www.ushmm.org/watch/first-person> and search “Nesse Godin”.
9. The Jewish community of Lithuania was only .9% of world Jewry prior to the Holocaust, but had long enjoyed a reputation of a uniquely important religious and cultural centre. Lithuanian-Jewry was highly intellectual-rational. For more see Dov Levin, *The Litvaks: A Short History of the Jews in Lithuania* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, Levin 2000).

10. In 2009, the U.S. government initiated steps to deport 89 year old John Demjanjuk to Germany, where he faced charges of assisting in the murder of at least 29,000 Jews at the Sobibor death camp. Though previously extradited to Israel and convicted as “Ivan the Terrible” of Treblinka, a verdict later overturned, Demjanjuk was again stripped of U.S. citizenship following renewed evidence of his involvement as a Nazi guard. The case drew controversy due to his age, health, and contested wartime history. See Andrea Hopkins (2009), “U.S. Takes Step to Deport Suspected Nazi Guard”, *Reuters*, published March 24, 2009, accessed May 4, 2025, <https://fpa.org/us-to-deport-alleged-nazi-guard/>.
11. Gluckstein’s 2004–2019 programs are accessible to the public in either audio or video format on USHMM’s website. See <https://www.ushmm.org/watch/first-person> and search “Fritz Gluckstein”.
12. Presner defines his concept of “ethics of an algorithm” as the tension between the ethical responsibility to listen closely to individual testimonies and the interpretive potential offered by computational approaches. Presner, *Ethics* (2024).
13. For more on Miriam Ringelheim’s foundational work on gender and Holocaust testimony, see Miriam Ringelheim, “Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research”, *Signs* 10, no. 4 (Ringelheim 1985, 741–761). Her analysis was among the first to foreground how gender mediates the testimonial act itself, shaping not just content but delivery and reception.

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