

Yad Vashem's Upgraded Names Database: Enhanced Technical Capabilities in the Service of Memory

by Alexander Avram

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Sixty years after the end of World War II, the State of Israel's Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem, continues to document Jews murdered in the Holocaust. This article describes several new technical capabilities recently added to Yad Vashem's Name Database. We begin with a short history of the database, the backbone of which are its Pages of Testimony.

Pages of Testimony Collection Efforts, 1955–2011

Between 1955 and 1957, Yad Vashem undertook a national Pages of Testimony (PoT) collection campaign in Israel, which yielded approximately 800,000 names of Holocaust victims, including names of children. By 1984–85, the collection had grown significantly and a microfilm project resulted in a back-up copy of 1,037,000 PoT.

In the early 1990s, Yad Vashem organized a massive project to index all the PoT and, between 1992 and 1998, 470,000 Pages of Testimony were indexed. In the 1999 computerization project, 1,100,000 Pages of Testimony were scanned and indexed.

During a renewed national (in Israel) Pages of Testimony collection campaign in 1999–2000, Yad Vashem collected about 400,000 additional names. The Pages of Testimony collection was posted online on November 2004. Today, Yad Vashem has close to 2,700,000 names of individual victims on Pages of Testimony in the Hall of Names.

Central Database of Shoah Victims Names

Since the end of November 2004, Yad Vashem has answered more than 129,000 inquiries related to the Central Database of Names. This past year alone, it received 1,948 requests for in-depth name searches and general information and documentation, including official certificates. As a result of 4,009 additional requests for correction of typographical errors, as well as the addition of photographs, documents and other data, 2015 saw a total of 14,531 updates to the name records in the database.

In addition to the updates resulting from requests, the database added 28,315 PoT; 87,331 name records from *yizkor* (Holocaust remembrance) books; 67,995 name records from documentation material in the Yad Vashem archives pertaining to Greater Hungary (Hungary within its wartime [1940–1944] borders); 35,674 name records from documentation material at Yad Vashem archives relevant to Poland; 20,400 name records from archives in the former Soviet Union; 11,704 name records from Orthodox Jewish religious sources; and 53,429 name records from other miscellaneous archives sources. (A name record is the whole

set of fields indexed from a document referring to a specific person and may include the family name, given name, date and place of birth, names of parents and spouse, place of residence, profession, marital status, places during the war, date and place of death and more. Name records of survivors or those based on documents restricted by official agreements cannot be posted yet.) In total, Yad Vashem added 304,848 name records, most of them available in the online names database.

Names Recovery Project in the Former USSR

As part of the names recovery project in the former USSR, Yad Vashem personnel made repeated visits from 2007 to this day to 25 communities in Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, the Russian Federation and Ukraine. The Joint Distribution Committee, the Jewish Agency, Chessed centers (local social assistance centers), local organizations and volunteers all provided support in the field.

Project directors enlisted the help of the local non-Jewish population as well as Russian-speaking Jewish community members in the former USSR, Germany, Israel, the United States and elsewhere to search for survivors' testimonies and local memorial projects, as well as archive material still retrievable, including personal archives. All available name lists now are computerized.

Names Recovery Project: Hebrew and Religious Sources

In Israel, Yad Vashem made digital photographs of names of victims on memorial plaques in synagogues, names commemorated in commentaries on the Bible and holy scriptures and names engraved on tombstones. In the United States, Agudath Israel America implemented the Names Project and collected Pages of Testimony primarily from Jews in the New York City area.

Hits/Searches in Names Database by Region – 2015

Region	Percentage %
North America	45.6
Europe	25.4
Israel	12.3
Asia	4.7
Former Soviet Union	4.7
Latin America	4.0
Australia Pacific Islands	2.0
Middle East	0.7
Africa	0.4
Total hits/searches	13,800,000 100

Over the last decade, Yad Vashem succeeded in dramatically increasing the percentage of Shoah victims identified and commemorated by name. Following is a breakdown by country.

Rudolph Stadler: An Example of Clustering of Data

THE CENTRAL DATABASE OF SHOAH VICTIMS' NAMES ^{BETA}

☐ records
 ☒ cluster

Records ☒ Clusters

4 Results for: ☒ Last / Maiden Name = stadler ☒ First Name = rudolf

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First Name	Last Name *	Birth Year	Place of Residence	Count	Clusters...	Images
Rudolf	Shtadler	1930		1		
Rudolf	Stadler			1		
Rudolf	Stadler Shtadler	1924	Ceske Budejovice, Czechoslovakia	9		
Rudi	Stedler			1		

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Today, a search for “name records” with the last name Stadler and the first name Rudolf gives a viewer 11 different name records displayed randomly in the database. On the other hand, a search for “clusters” with the last name Stadler and the first name Rudolf produces four different clusters. Under the heading “count,” viewers can see the number of different name records in each cluster. The total is 12, one more record than before. There are four clusters, possibly for four different individuals, but it also is possible that name records in different record clusters may refer to the same person, but could not be clustered because of lack of sufficient common data items.

When we expand the clusters, we see the last name Stadler (not Stad/er). This is the twelfth record that was missing in the initial search. It is a misspelling that cannot be caught by Soundex, but was manually added to this specific cluster for the benefit of the researcher.

Eventually, when all the nine name records are put together on one screen, viewers will see all the matching data items in all the fields. This will allow one to know Rudolph Stadler’s ultimate fate, “murdered,” something not stated, of course, in documents created before his death.

Additions to the Yad Vashem

Holocaust Victims Names Database in the Last Decade		
Country (1938 borders)	Victims' names in 2004	Victims' names in 2015
Ukraine	20%	45%
Belorussia	23%	46%
Poland	35%	54%
Hungary	45%	71%
Greece	35%	73%

Central Database of Shoah Victims Names, January 2016

As of January 2016, Yad Vashem had 5,429,654 name records that document approximately 4,600,000 individual Jews murdered during the Shoah. The number of name records is larger than that of individual victims because sometimes one victim may be documented in more than one record, perhaps in two Pages of Testimony completed by different submitters, or on a Page of Testimony and a deportation list or camp inmate card, thus resulting in multiple name records for the same person. The names database now also includes an additional 2,135,000 name records documenting Jews whose fate still is to be determined. This includes 420,000 names of victims of Nazi racial persecution (ghetto and camp prisoners, deportees, detainees and so forth),

431,000 names of Jewish residents registered for different purposes by Nazi occupation forces or the local administration and 832,000 names of victims of the “evacuation” to the East in the USSR. In this context, “evacuation” was the process of partly organized, but mostly voluntary, flight of the Soviet civil population in front of the Nazi offensive in June 1941 from the western part of the USSR eastward, especially toward the central Asian republics. The percentage of Jews among these refugees was extremely high.

Formerly, these name records were accessible only through searches on the intranet network within Yad Vashem; most now are accessible online on the Internet. More than 452,000 name records of survivors are not yet online because of data privacy sensibilities.

Central Database of Shoah Victims Names: New Interface as of January 2016

To continue to meet the needs of an expanding worldwide audience, Yad Vashem has upgraded and redesigned its database making use of an innovative and technologically superior platform that allows accessibility of online information in a faster and more user-friendly format. Improvements and changes include:

- Faster results, shorter display time

- Unlimited number of query results
- Expanded sort and refinement filters
- Scroll through records more quickly
- Toggle between language interfaces available on all pages
- High contrast mode for increased readability
- Responsive design for mobile device compatibility for viewing and full use on smartphones and tablets
- Open to modular additions of new content units and technological features

The Next Phase: Beginning in 2017

Over the past decades, Yad Vashem's primary efforts focused on the collection of Shoah Victims' names from all possible sources and the creation of a uni-dimensional registry of the victims' basic personal data for commemoration and humanitarian assistance purposes.

The time has come to focus on research based on the wealth of data gathered within the database. This will include:

- Basic micro-research: the creation of "personal virtual files" for individual victims through a process of cross-referencing, matching and clustering of name records, in order to obtain an in-depth "description/perception" of the Shoah victims (those who were murdered, survived or whose fate remains unknown at this stage), including photographs, personal documents or artifacts and short bios wherever available.
- General research: use of the database as the basis for projects on deportation patterns, the camps and ghetto sys-

tems, murder sites location and impact; socio-demographic research (profile of victims and survivors; migration, marriage and family composition patterns); historical research by groups of individuals (partisans, sportsmen, cantors, photographers and others); onomastic research of Jewish names.

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