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February 12, 2011

Israeli Archive and Google Team Up to Put Holocaust Stories at Fingertips

By DINA KRAFT

TEL AVIV — When [Google](#), the world's largest search engine, joined forces with Yad Vashem, keeper of the world's largest Holocaust archive, the first thing one Google employee here did was search for his grandfather's name.

A [link](#) took the employee, Doron Avni, to a Google-operated page on the Yad Vashem Web site showing a photograph of his grandfather, Yechezkel Fleischer, taken in 1941 just after he was released from a Nazi-run prison in Lithuania.

Under the photograph of his grandfather, then 27, dark-eyed and gaunt, Mr. Avni was able to type in details of his grandfather's story. Icons on the page from [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and other social media outlets allow for immediate sharing of the images and attached information.

“It's a milestone that marks a new era in our ability to disseminate and bring useful accessibility to Yad Vashem's databases,” said Avner Shalev, chairman of Yad Vashem, at a news conference last month at Google's offices in central Tel Aviv.

Yad Vashem began digitizing its holdings in the 1990s and has an extensive Web site, but the technology of Google, and the expertise of a team of employees who have been working on the project for three years, will make the information easier to find in search engines.

The photographs have been scanned using optical character recognition, which identifies any text in the pictures, making it searchable. So if Mr. Avni's grandfather's name had not been listed in a document but had been inscribed on a photograph, whether in Latin or Hebrew letters, he would still have been found.

The first stage of the Holocaust memorial's partnership with Google includes about 130,000 photographs in full resolution, stored on a Google server, with the option for users to add commentary, including historical backgrounds and personal family stories. The long-term goal is

to include Yad Vashem's larger archive of millions of documents, including survivor testimonials, diaries, letters and manuscripts.

Two years ago Google and Yad Vashem began their first joint project, a [YouTube channel](#) for viewing Holocaust survivors' testimonials.

John Palfrey, co-director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard, said that although such public-private partnerships could make significant contributions, the private control of a public resource raised potential conflicts.

"Down the road this altruistic project could look different," Mr. Palfrey said by phone from Cambridge, Mass. "I would say it's a good thing that information is made available to the world, but many of us worry about the central role a company is playing in the preservation of the world's cultural information."

"It is about unknowns," he said. "We don't know where the corporate interest might get misaligned with the public interest down the line." For now, the interests appear to have converged.

After viewing his grandfather's photograph, Mr. Avni, the policy manager at Google's research and development center in Israel, added comments about how his grandfather hid in the forests of Lithuania until the end of World War II, only to be discovered by Russian soldiers who initially mistook him for a German and wanted to kill him.

When the soldiers were presented with the same photograph, clearly identifying him as a Jew because his shirt bore the Star of David that Nazis forced Jews to wear, his life was spared.

"What my grandfather wanted was for the next generation to know about the Holocaust," Mr. Avni said. "He would have been inspired by this, to know his message is now being communicated to so many people around the world."