Spoken Paper

“Can you sing us a song?” – The role of music in Pinchas Gutter’s testimonies

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Pinchas Gutter (born 1932 in Lodz, Poland) – a Holocaust survivor – becomes quite well known in recent times: His testimony is one of the so called prototypes of the “Dimensions in Testimonies” (produced by the Shoah Foundation): People do have the possibility to ask questions about his life which were recorded before and can now be matched and answered with the help of Natural Language Processing. When I watched people “interacting” with this surface at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, they also asked him the question: “Can you sing us a song?” Based on these experiences I realized that music plays a crucial role in Pinchas Gutter’s life: He serves as a cantor at the Kiever Synagogue in Toronto to this day and he is well aware of his ability to sing and the power of music. Also in other types of testimonies he uses singing as a pedagogical tool: From his interview he gave to the Shoah Foundation in 1995 up to his testimony for the Dimension Project in 2014 as well as the VR-movie “The Last Goodbye” (2017), music plays a crucial role for shaping memory and identity. In my analyses I will also include his written biography “Memories in Focus” (2018), too. Thus I do combine different media sources and explore, what role music plays in these documents regarding surviving physically and as a Jew. Therefore I will address my presentation to the topic of inclusion and crossing borders.

From the perspective of Holocaust Studies, a proposal is made how testimonies from survivors can be made accessible for teaching and learning with special consideration of cultural diversity: The testimonies contain information on how political rulers controlled the education and practice of music. And it becomes
clear how individuals and communities could oppose it – viewed by Pinchas Gutter in different media. On the basis of these considerations, conclusions will be drawn for providing such testimonies in educational contexts.