At the end of December 2010, Alexander Avraham, Director of Yad Vashem’s Hall of Names, made an historic announcement: Yad Vashem has now collected two-thirds of the names of all Holocaust victims – four million names. One of its central missions since its foundation, the recovery of each and every victim’s name and personal story has resulted in relentless efforts – with the support of Jewish and other organizations worldwide – to reach a complete account of the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis and their accomplices.

The first endeavors in this colossal task led to the development of Pages of Testimony, one-page questionnaires designed to restore the personal identity of each individual Holocaust victim. Beginning in the 1950s, campaigns have continued throughout the years in Israel and among Jewish communities abroad requesting survivors, family members or friends to submit Pages of Testimony. “Pages of Testimony rebuild an individual’s identity, beyond a reference on a deportation or camp inmate list,” explains Avraham. “Those lists were created during wartime by the Nazis and their collaborators, for their own murderous purposes. It is our moral imperative not to leave the commemoration of our lost brethren to our enemies, who wished to destroy them. Today some 2.2 million of the names we have retrieved come from Pages of Testimony.”

In the 1990s, Yad Vashem extended its efforts beyond Pages of Testimony, actively gathering and processing lists of names originating from deportation transports and camp and ghetto records. By organizing and encouraging common workshops and mutual exchanges of data, methodology and expertise, Yad Vashem became the leading force in this attempt to assemble all of the available knowledge concerning Shoah victims.

This second track for retrieving the names of Holocaust victims involves “mining” the archival materials in the Yad Vashem Archives for relevant missing data. The Archives house the largest collection of Holocaust documentation in the world: 130 million pages of documentation, 100,000 survivor testimonies, 400,000 photographs and 15,000 Righteous Among the Nations case files, as well as 25,000 artifacts and 12,000 pieces of art. Through intelligent cross-referencing of all of these elements, the life stories of more and more Holocaust victims are being reconstructed daily (see “Retrieving Their Identities,” p. 9).

By the year 2000, an intensive computerization project resulted in the creation of a database containing close to 2.5 million names of Shoah victims. In November 2004, the Central Database of Shoah Victims’ Names was uploaded to the Yad Vashem website (www.yadvashem.org) with some three million names, offering the general public full and free access to the victims’ names in English and in Hebrew, and later also in Russian.

The Names Database is the result of decades of dedicated and painstaking work by Yad Vashem, in close cooperation with an ever-growing number of partners documenting the victims of Nazi persecution in Europe and beyond. Founded on a sophisticated technological platform, advanced search capabilities - including “soundex” (the indexing of words by their pronunciation) and the unique Yad Vashem-devised synonyms search, which allows for multiple spellings and names of the same person or location – were developed to maximize results.

The documents from which the data are extracted are often difficult to decipher, requiring a high degree of expertise in handwriting in various languages. Some 50 Yad Vashem experts trained in names cataloguing digitally scan the documents, enter the relevant information and record the names within. The information is then uploaded to the Names Database, allowing online searches to be performed by visitors to the website. “The increasing interest of the global community in the human dimension of the Shoah is most evident on the Internet,” adds Avraham. “More than 10 million visits are registered annually on Yad Vashem’s website, from over 200 countries and territories worldwide.”

The retrieving of four million names is a significant accomplishment, but this obviously means that one third of the Holocaust victims remain to be identified. While in Western Europe in particular there were often lists kept of the Jews deported, in countries of Eastern Europe and the areas of the former Soviet Union, as well as Greece, much information is still lacking.
“During the last five years we have concentrated our names recovery efforts in areas where most of the names remain unknown,” says Avraham. “We have made great progress. In 2005, we knew the names of some 20% of Jews murdered in Ukraine, today we know 35%; in Byelorussia the figure has risen from 23% to 37% today, in Poland (1938 borders) from 35% to 46%, in Hungary from 45% to 65%, and in Greece from 35% to 70%.”

The active and urgent efforts to locate these names is being led by Yad Vashem’s Shoah Victims’ Names Recovery Project, through its ongoing worldwide Pages of Testimony venture, interviewing members of Jewish communities in the FSU and other countries, photographing gravestones, and extracting names from memorial books and synagogue plaques. The Project also collects documents and records from individuals and organizations, and creates new documentation – lists of names from various sources. “Pages of Testimony and Project campaign material have been widely distributed to Jewish communal venues in Israel, America, Europe, Australia, South America and South Africa, encouraging people to investigate whether or not their loved ones killed during the Shoah are recorded at Yad Vashem,” explains Cynthia Wroclawski, Manager of the Names Recovery Project. “The grassroots efforts of local Jewish communities are critical in accessing the millions of additional names that still linger in the memories of survivors or in the lore of their families. Through local outreach campaigns, the Project aims to ensure that no Shoah victim will ever be forgotten.”

“No cemeteries, headstones or traces of life were left to mark the loss of the majority of the six million Holocaust victims,” concludes Avraham. “Yad Vashem will not rest until every one of them is commemorated within its walls.”

The indexing of the Names Database and the Names Recovery Project are supported by: the Victim List Project of the Swiss Banks Settlement; Hi-Tech Entrepreneur Yossie Hollander; the Claims Conference; Dayenu Ltd, led by Gail Blum; Colin Halpern and family; the Nadav Fund and the Noaber Foundation; the National Fund of the Republic of Austria for Victims of National Socialism; the American Society for Yad Vashem; the Fondation pour la Memoire de la Shoah; Wexner – The Legacy Heritage Fund; Stichting Collectieve Marorgelden Israel; Dora Zitno; Hanna Rubenstein; Edith Steinlauf; and additional supporters.

Retrieving Their Identities

Dr. Arie Biegun, Brest Litovsk, Poland

■ Arie Biegun was born in Brest Litovsk (Brisk). His whole family was murdered during the Shoah, leaving nobody behind to give testimony about what happened to him. In the 1960s, a Page of Testimony in his memory was submitted to Yad Vashem by Avraham Strikman, a native of the same city who remembered him. Although he had no idea of Biegun’s fate, he filled in the title “Dr.” and wrote that Biegun had been a physician.

Most of the Jews of Brest were murdered on 15 October 1942. In recent years, Yad Vashem researchers copied a collection of documents of the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission in Moscow. There they found a list of the Jews who were murdered in Brest, including written evidence that Dr. Biegun was indeed killed. However, they also discovered that he was not murdered alone. Next to his name was that of his wife Sofia (Sara), and two daughters, Celina and Shulamit, all of them murdered with him.

Joachim Weingarten, Drohobycz, Poland

■ Joachim Weingarten’s name first appeared in the Names Database as a line on a list of 76,000 Jews deported from France to the extermination camps in Poland. There was no Page of Testimony, nobody left, apparently, to remember him. According to the document, he was sent to Auschwitz on 17 July 1942 on Transport no. 6. His birth date was reportedly 1875, his birth place illegible except for the last three letters “icz.”

Years later, a document received from the Auschwitz-Birkenau National Museum confirmed Weingarten’s death in the camp on 28 August 1942. The document states his real birth date, 9 October 1895, his birth place as Drohobycz, Poland, his parents’ names, and his residence as Paris, France. A few more years passed until a book catalogued in the Yad Vashem Library completed the picture: an album describing the lives and works of the “Groupe des quatre,” four young Jewish painters from Eastern Galicia studying in Montmartre, includes a self-portrait by Joachim Weingarten, some of his modernist paintings and two full pages of his biography.