Linking Historical Maps to the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive

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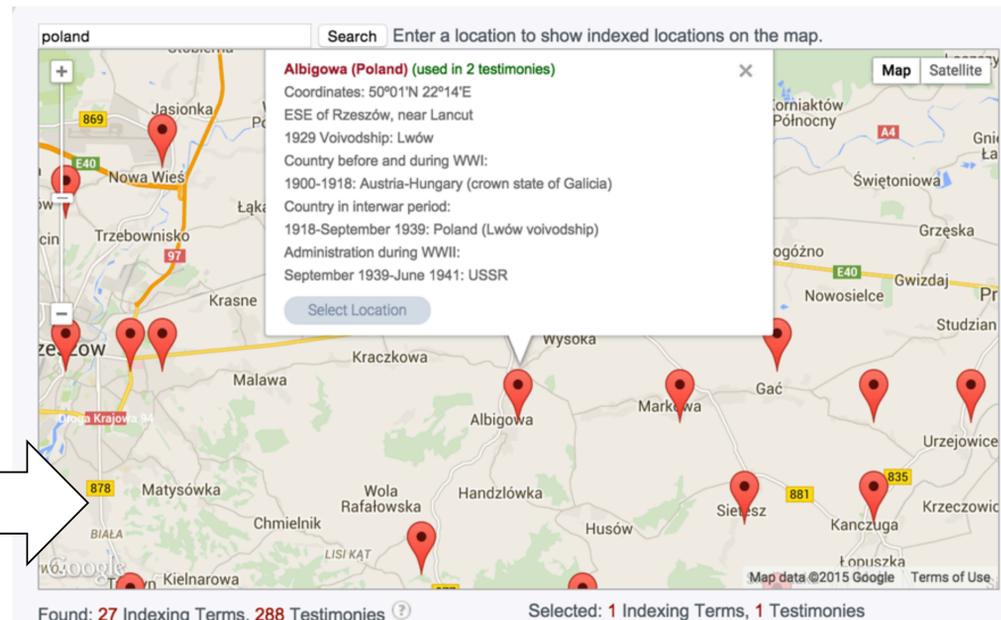Spatial Computing Laboratory, Spatial Sciences Institute, University of Southern California

Background

The Visual History Archive (VHA) in the USC Shoah Foundation contains a large collection of digital life stories of survivors before, during, and after the Holocaust and other genocides https://sfi.usc.edu/vha

- video interviews of the survivors
- interview transcripts

Location information (e.g., place names) mentioned in the VHA is indexed by keywords

For example, using "Poland" as the keyword for place search on the VHA Online returns:
5,325 indexing terms in which the indexing terms (place names) with verified locations are displayed in a Google Maps web interface
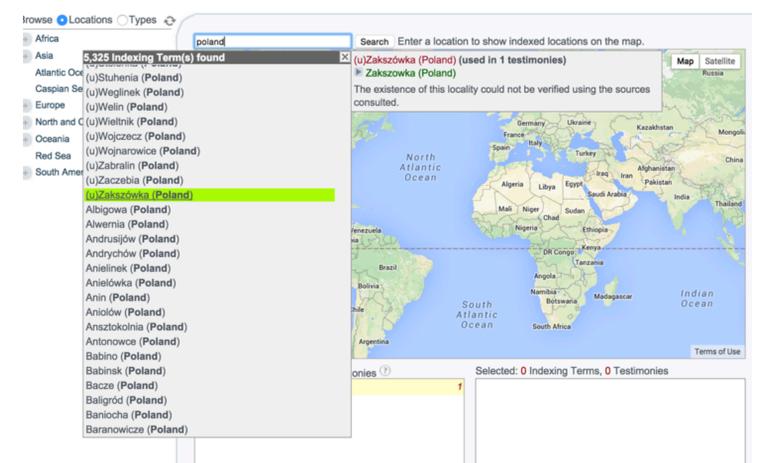

Problem Statement

Since **place names** and **administration boundaries** can change significantly over time,
- displaying search results on a current map does not provide the best visualization tool
- a number places mentioned in the testimony cannot be located due to the lack of historical sources for verifying the location information of these places

This limits the opportunity for:
- researchers, educators, and the general public to access valuable VHA materials
- prevents the VHA collection from being indexed and searched by advanced spatial queries (e.g., finding the testimonies mentioned cities or towns in Poland between 1930 and 1945).
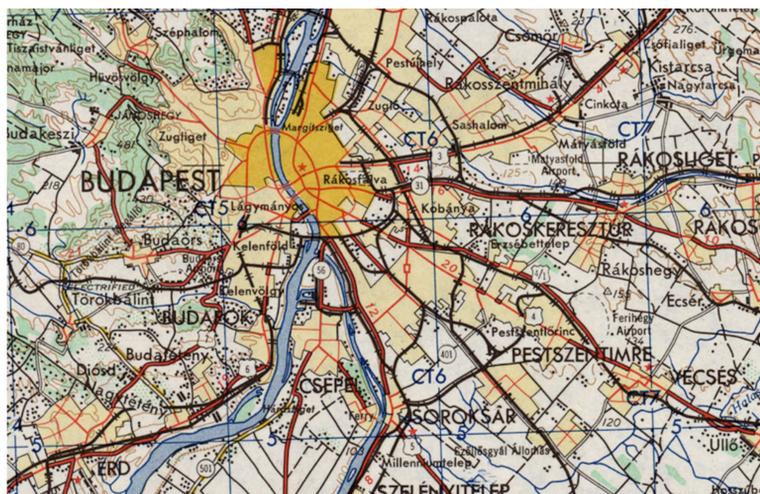

Indexing terms that do not have a verified location

Linking Historical Maps to VHA: Preliminary Investigation and Future Work

Historical maps are a great source of detailed place information in the past with a comprehensive list of place names including towns, manufacturing plants, monuments, etc.
- The US Army Map Service (AMS) created around 40,000 maps covering a significant amount of the earth
- Other map sources provide detailed historical pre- and post-WWII maps, such as the Polish mapping company, Centrum Kartografii, which offers pre-WWII maps of Poland
- These historical maps are in either paper or scanned format in map archives
    - the David Rumsey Map Collection
    - the USC Libraries, UCLA Map Libraries, Western Michigan Libraries, and the Library of Congress

With the help of the USC Undergraduate Research Associates Program, our undergraduate researchers Andrew Hsu, Robin Franke, and Alex Chen took VHA testimonies of Holocaust and Rwandan genocide survivors, and link their stories to historical maps found online and in the libraries (http://spatial-computing.github.io/#projects)
- The results are **spatially enabled journals** that **provide a vivid context of the personal life of the genocide survivors**
- Allow the VHA stories to be **indexed and searched by more detailed spatial keywords**
- **We plan to extend this work to build automatic approaches that find and link historical maps to VHA digital materials**

Budapest in a 1:250,000 AMS map (compiled in 1955 by AMS using Hungary 1:50,000 datasets of 1928-44).