

# JIMENA Oral History Guide

How to record, preserve, and share the testimony of a Sephardic or Mizrahi Jew, whether you are a trained interviewer, a teacher, or a grandchild with a phone

## WHO IT IS FOR

Families, students, teachers, community groups, and volunteer interviewers

## WHAT YOU NEED

A phone or camera, a quiet room, about two hours, and a signed release form

## INSIDE

Interview tips, questions, a pre-interview questionnaire, a narrator FAQ, and how to submit

## Why Record a Testimony?

For more than 2,500 years, Jewish communities thrived across the Middle East and North Africa. In the twentieth century, nearly all of them were uprooted: more than 850,000 Jews left or were driven from Arab countries, and most of Iran's Jews followed after 1979. The people who remember that world firsthand are growing older, and many of their stories have never been recorded.

An oral history preserves what no textbook can: the sound of a grandmother's voice, the name of a neighborhood synagogue, the taste of a holiday dish, the night a family left with one suitcase. JIMENA has recorded testimonies since 2009, and our collection is preserved permanently at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev and shared freely with the public. With this guide, anyone can add a voice to that record.

**Our standards.** JIMENA's interviewers were trained by the USC Shoah Foundation in best practices for recording testimony, and this guide brings those practices to families and communities. Every testimony requires the narrator's informed consent and a signed release form, and every narrator chooses how their story may be shared.

## 1. Before the Interview

- 1 **Choose your narrator and explain the project.** Tell them what you will ask about, how long it will take (about 1.5 to 2 hours, plus setup), and how the recording will be used. Share the Narrator FAQ (section 7) a week ahead.
- 2 **Review the release form together.** The narrator must sign JIMENA's Release and Consent Form before you record, and choose how their testimony may be shared. If the narrator is under 18, a parent or guardian must also sign.
- 3 **Ask them to gather keepsakes.** Photographs, passports, letters, ketubot, recipes, and other documents bring a testimony to life.
- 4 **Do your homework.** Read about the narrator's country and community. JIMENA's Cultural Heritage pages at [jimena.org](http://jimena.org) are a good place to start. Ask the narrator to complete the pre-interview questionnaire (section 5).
- 5 **Plan for emotion.** Memories of violence, loss, or leaving home can be painful. Agree in advance that the narrator can pause or skip any question.
- 6 **Test your equipment the day before** and charge every battery.

## 2. Equipment and Setup

| Item     | What to do                                                                                                                                                                                |
|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Camera   | A recent smartphone works well. Record in landscape (horizontal), at 1080p HD. Turn on airplane mode and do not disturb so calls do not interrupt.                                        |
| Sound    | Sound matters more than picture. Use a clip-on (lavalier) microphone that plugs into the phone if you can. Choose a quiet room away from traffic, air conditioners, clocks, and kitchens. |
| Light    | Place the narrator facing a window or lamp, never with a bright window behind them.                                                                                                       |
| Framing  | Use a tripod or stack of books. Frame the narrator from the chest up, with the camera at eye level. A plain background is best.                                                           |
| Position | Sit beside the camera so the narrator looks at you, not into the lens. Only the narrator should appear on camera.                                                                         |
| Storage  | Make sure the phone or memory card has plenty of free space. One hour of HD video can take several gigabytes.                                                                             |

## 3. During the Interview

- **Begin with a slate.** Start recording and say your name, the narrator's name, the date, and the place.
- **Start gently.** Thank the narrator and ask about the meaning of their name.
- **Ask open questions.** "Can you describe your childhood home?" works better than "Did you like your home?" Avoid yes or no questions and questions that suggest an answer.
- **One question at a time.** Ask the narrator to answer in full sentences, repeating the question, so each clip makes sense on its own.
- **Listen more than you talk.** Nod rather than saying "yes" or "uh huh." Do not interrupt.
- **Use the six second rule.** When the narrator finishes an answer, wait six seconds before the next question. Often the most important memory comes after a pause.
- **Follow up.** "Where was that?" "When was that?" "What did it look like?" "How did you feel?"
- **Film the keepsakes.** Keep recording as the narrator shows each photo or document and explains who, where, and when.
- **Take breaks** whenever the narrator needs them, and keep water nearby.
- **Close warmly.** Ask, "Is there anything you would like to add, or a message for future generations?" Then thank them.

Family members may sit in the room if the narrator wishes, but ask them not to interrupt or answer for the narrator.

## 4. Interview Questions

You do not need to ask every question. Use these as a guide and follow the narrator's story. Most JIMENA testimonies move through three parts: Jewish life in the country of origin, leaving, and building a new life.

### Family and Roots

- What is your full name, and where does it come from?
- Where and when were you born? Can you describe your childhood home?

- What do you know about your grandparents and parents: where they were born, their work, and their lives?
- How did your parents meet? What did your mother do? What did your father do?
- Do you have brothers and sisters? Where do they live today?

## **Life in Your Country of Origin**

- What neighborhood did you live in? Was it mostly Jewish or mixed?
- What languages did your family speak at home and with neighbors (for example Judeo-Arabic, Ladino, Judeo-Persian, French, Arabic)? Were there favorite sayings?
- What schools did you attend? Who were your friends?
- How did your family celebrate Shabbat and holidays? What foods, songs, and customs do you remember?
- Tell me about your synagogue, weddings, births, and other community traditions.
- Were there Jewish or Zionist organizations in your community? What role did your family play?
- What were relations like with Muslim, Christian, and other neighbors? Do you have special memories of non-Jewish friends?
- How were Jews treated by the government, police, and authorities?

## **Turning Points**

- Do you remember events such as riots, wars, revolutions, or new laws that affected Jews (for example the Farhud, the 1967 war, or the 1979 revolution in Iran)? How did they affect your family?
- Did you or people you knew experience discrimination, violence, arrest, or loss of property or citizenship?
- Did anyone, Jewish or not, help or protect your family?

## **Leaving**

- When and why did your family leave? Was it planned, sudden, or secret?
- How did you travel, and who helped (for example the Jewish Agency, HIAS, or the Joint Distribution Committee)?
- What did your family have to leave behind: home, property, savings, belongings? What did the community leave behind: synagogues, schools, cemeteries?
- Did your family receive refugee status? Where did you stay along the way?

## **A New Life**

- Where did you settle, and when? Did you live in more than one country?
- What were your first experiences like? How did your parents make a living?
- How did your family adjust? Did you face prejudice or challenges?
- How have you kept your heritage alive: traditions, food, prayer, language, music?
- Have you ever returned, or wished to return? What would you like your grandchildren and future generations to know?

## 5. Pre-Interview Questionnaire

The narrator or interviewer completes this before recording. It helps you prepare and gives archivists the key facts.

|                                              |                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Full name _____                              | Name at birth or maiden name _____                 |
| Date of birth _____                          | Place of birth (city, neighborhood) _____          |
| Father's name, birthplace, occupation _____  | Mother's name, maiden name, birthplace _____       |
| Siblings and where they live _____           | Spouse and his or her background _____             |
| Children and where they live _____           | Schooling and occupation _____                     |
| Nationalities held, past and present _____   | Year and way you left your country of origin _____ |
| Organizations that helped you resettle _____ | Refugee status, and where you were resettled _____ |
| Countries lived in since leaving _____       | Year you arrived in your current country _____     |
| Experiences of persecution, if any _____     | Synagogue or community memberships _____           |
| Languages spoken _____                       | Have you been interviewed before? By whom? _____   |

## 6. After the Interview

- 1 Back up right away.** Copy the recording to two places, such as a computer and a cloud account or external drive.
- 2 Name your files clearly:** Lastname\_Firstname\_Country\_Year (for example, Cohen\_Esther\_Morocco\_2026).
- 3 Write a short summary** (one or two paragraphs): who the narrator is, where they are from, and the main topics and events they describe. List key places, people, and events.
- 4 Scan or photograph keepsakes** and note who and what is in each image.
- 5 Thank the narrator** and give them a copy of the recording.
- 6 Share it with JIMENA.** Submit the testimony through the Share My Story form at [jimena.org](http://jimena.org) with the signed release form, a photo of the narrator, and your summary. If your file is larger than the upload limit, upload a short excerpt and email [info@jimena.org](mailto:info@jimena.org) with a link to the full recording.

**What happens next.** JIMENA reviews every submission and confirms the narrator's consent and access choice before anything is published. With the narrator's permission, testimonies may be featured on JIMENA's website, used in educational materials, and preserved alongside JIMENA's collection at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

## 7. Narrator FAQ

Share this with the person you are interviewing about a week before the interview.

**How should I prepare?**

Come rested, with time set aside and few distractions. Gather photographs, documents, and keepsakes you would like to show. Wear a solid colored top without busy patterns.

**What will I be asked?**

The interview feels like a conversation. You will be asked about Jewish life in your country of origin, the story of leaving, and your life since. It usually takes 1.5 to 2 hours, with breaks whenever you need them.

**How should I answer?**

As honestly and openly as you feel comfortable. Your story is an important part of Jewish history, and every detail matters. Please answer in full sentences.

**What if I become emotional or need to stop?**

That is natural and expected. You may take a break, skip any question, or stop at any time. Let your interviewer know in advance if there are topics you would rather avoid.

**Who will see my testimony?**

You decide. On the release form you choose whether your testimony may be shared openly online, shared without your full name, kept for research and education only, or restricted until a later date. You can change your choice later by contacting JIMENA.

**Do I have to sign the release form?**

Yes. JIMENA follows best practices in oral history and cannot accept a testimony without the narrator's signed consent. We are happy to review the form with you and answer questions.

**Will I receive a copy?**

Yes. Your interviewer will give you a copy of your recording. It is a wonderful gift to share with your family.

**Can a family member join me?**

Yes, if it helps you feel comfortable. We ask that they not interrupt or answer for you, so that the testimony remains in your own words.

## 8. For Teachers and Students

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Recording a testimony is a powerful classroom project. Students can interview a grandparent or community member, then share what they learned. JIMENA's Oral Histories lesson plan, on the Lesson Plans page at [jimena.org](http://jimena.org), guides students through listening to testimonies and conducting their own interviews. For students under 18, follow your school's policies and have a parent or guardian sign the release form along with the narrator.

## Contact Us

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Questions about recording or submitting a testimony? Email [info@jimena.org](mailto:info@jimena.org) or visit [jimena.org](http://jimena.org).

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