

LESSON: Teaching with Holocaust Survivor Testimony

HANDOUT: Guidelines for Teaching with Holocaust Survivor Testimony

THE ROLE OF PERSONAL MEMORY IN HISTORY

One of the most powerful ways of remembering the Holocaust and honoring its victims is to bring the voices of survivors to your students.¹ Oral history interviews provide glimpses into the history of the Holocaust that cannot be obtained from documents or written records. While textual documents are essential for the study of the Holocaust, an individual's testimony can supplement those documents by providing a detailed and personal look at a historical event that may be underrepresented or even absent from written works.

Survivor testimonies (and eyewitness testimonies in general) provide a window into the thoughts, feelings, motivations, and fears of people who experienced history. Testimonies reflect an individual's memory of events - often recalled decades after the events themselves. And although oral testimony interviews are typically structured systematically with questions chosen by the interviewer, the interviewee decides how they will deliver their narrative -- including or omitting details either purposefully or unconsciously.

All human-constructed narratives are fallible reconstructions of reality -- each with unique strengths and weaknesses. Photographers choose what to include in a photograph, as well as what is to leave outside the frame. Government documents reflect what one official thought would be important information to convey to another official or to the public. In this sense, eyewitness testimonies are no less nor more reliable than other sources. However, they provide a valuable window into the impact that the Holocaust had on individuals and how, after many years, survivors make meaning of their experiences.

TRANSLATING STATISTICS INTO INDIVIDUALS

For educators, survivor testimony offers an opportunity to place a human face on an overwhelming and far away piece of history. The numbers of victims and the complexity of the events and scope of geography and destruction is vast, and survivor testimony allows students to learn from an individual who tells the story of what happened to them and their family. Telling the story in the first person, survivors speak of things that students can comprehend -- the love of a parent, their friends at school, the pain of separation from a loved one, the humiliation of exclusion, and even the fear of losing a parent or sibling. Precisely because they portray people in the fullness of their lives and not just as victims, first-person accounts and memoir literature add individual voices to a collective experience and help students make meaning out of statistics. In the words of the political theorist Hannah Arendt, "the story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings" (*Men in Dark Times*).

¹ For additional guidance, see: *Using Testimony in Holocaust Education*. Yad Vashem.

<https://www.yadvashem.org/education/educational-materials/lesson-plans/use-of-testimony.html> and *Using Visual History Testimony in the Classroom*. USC Shoah Foundation: The Institute for Visual History and Education. https://www.facinghistory.org/sites/default/files/USCSF_Teaching_Guidelines.pdf

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PERSONALIZING HISTORY & CONTEXTUALIZING THE PARTICULAR

However, although survivor testimony can [personalize history](#) and emphasize its impact on individuals, educators must place events described in survivor testimony into historical context so students can understand the circumstances that led to particular actions or events. It is exactly because their stories are so individual, that survivor testimony must always be one resource among many - primary and secondary - that students use to learn about the Holocaust.

DOCUMENTING THE OTHERWISE UNSEEN AND UNKNOWABLE

Conversely, there are aspects of the history for which there are few or no images, documents or artifacts -- inside the crematoria, the train cars, death marches, and even home life inside the ghettos or in hiding. In these cases, personal accounts -- oral testimonies, diaries, and memoirs -- are often the only documentation available to students today.

“BEARING WITNESS”

The act of listening to testimony is qualitatively different from learning history through secondary sources, documentary films, or historical documents and photographs. Whether in the legal sense or the religious meaning, when someone testifies, it is understood that the listener carries a responsibility to bear witness -- carefully and critically listening in order to consider and understand, but also to acknowledge the reality of the events and experiences conveyed. In the case of Holocaust survivor testimony, an additional responsibility is implied -- that the listener should share what they have learned, and ask themselves, “Now that I know, what will I do with this knowledge?”

Because the Holocaust was an attempt by the Nazis and their collaborators to physically annihilate every Jewish person, many survivors choose to give testimony as a means of honoring and preserving the memory of family members, friends, and entire communities of people who did not survive. Also, because an essential element of genocide is the destruction of memory and denial of truth, survivors tell their stories so that their truth may be known; so that knowledge of the history will persist, and in the hope that this will help prevent similar events from being perpetrated. Students who bear witness to survivors’ stories honor both their memory and the memory of those who did not survive, many of whom implored those who did survive to tell the world what happened during the Holocaust.

Finally, Holocaust survivors are people who suffered great indignity, pain, and loss due to antisemitism, racism, indifference, and greed. For this reason, many educators view them as a “moral voice” that speaks with authenticity about the need to [respect one’s neighbor, embrace diversity, and speak out against injustice](#).

BRINGING SURVIVOR TESTIMONY INTO THE CLASSROOM

If you are interested in the possibility of a Holocaust survivor speaking at your school, contact a [local Holocaust education organization](#), if there is one in your area, to see if they have a speakers bureau. There is no substitute for meeting a person who experienced history and can share memories of what they,

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themselves, lived and witnessed. If you and your students are fortunate enough to meet with a survivor, it is important to create an environment that maximizes the comfort of your guest speaker and the opportunity for students to ask meaningful questions that promote learning and understanding. With that in mind, the Museum offers detailed [guidelines for arranging a survivor presentation](#).

However, as time advances farther from the era of the Holocaust, you may need to rely upon recorded testimony for student exposure to personal memories of the event. Over 79,000 oral history interviews are indexed in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collections, and [more than 17,000 are freely available to be accessed online](#). In addition, the Museum provides hundreds of [curated testimony clips](#) in its Holocaust Encyclopedia, as well as [many other sections of the Museum's website](#).

Below are resources to assist you in identifying survivor testimonies to enhance your teaching of Holocaust history.

- [Survivor Testimony Video Clips](#) – short clips taken from interviews with survivors of the Holocaust and persecution by the Nazis and their collaborators
- [Complete Oral Histories](#) - Over 17,000 digitized oral histories are available online via the Museum's collections database.
- [First Person podcast](#) – This audio series features interviews with Holocaust survivors excerpted from the Museum's *First Person* program.
- [First Person: Conversations with Holocaust Survivors](#) – This hour long program is offered live via streaming video of Holocaust survivors as they share their remarkable personal stories of hope, tragedy, and survival with visitors at the Museum; recordings of previous year's programs are available to stream via YouTube.
- [Eyewitness to History](#) – This video library features testimonies from Holocaust survivors who volunteer with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
- [Behind Every Name a Story](#) – essays written by survivors or their families describing survivors' experiences during the Holocaust
- [The Memory Project](#) – writings by Holocaust survivors who volunteer at the Museum