

Education Working Group Paper:

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST WITHOUT SURVIVORS¹

First-person survivor testimony in many countries has been an integral part of Holocaust education since its inception. They have been, and continue to be, the bearers of witness in educational frameworks, both formal and informal, in classrooms, museums, and on student visits to memorial sites.

But, the necessity of teaching the Holocaust without survivors and other first-person eyewitnesses, who can visit classrooms and talk with students, has already become a reality in many parts of the educational world in most, if not all countries. The demographic facts are that the youngest of the survivors are now in their 70's and 80's and many, if not most of them, were hidden and have no memory of the camps and resistance movements. The same demographic facts apply to the "Righteous Among the Nations" and the "Liberators." Therefore, another teaching mechanism must be substituted that will approximate as closely as possible the experience of listening to a survivor in person. Fortunately, there are large collections of oral histories that are readily available for classroom use in whole or in part. The USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, and other institutions have such source materials and can and do make them available.

Of course, survivor testimony is only one aspect of learning about the Holocaust. Knowledge of the history comes from a wide variety of sources, survivor testimony being one, albeit a crucial component of the process.

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When used appropriately, the USC Shoah Foundation Institute suggests that such testimony can:

- **Provide a face to history.**
- **Help students learn history from an individual perspective.**
- **Help students and teachers appreciate the invalidity of stereotypes, misconceptions, and/or generalizations.**
- **Help students discount misconceptions they might have had about the period/topic of study, and the events and/or people involved in the topic.**
- **Help students identify different type of information available in primary sources.**
- **Sensitize students to the distinction between fact and opinion, and essential and non-essential information.**
- **Provide students with an effective understanding of history.**
- **Help students understand the long-term ramifications of extreme persecution and trauma.**
- **Introduce students to new-and various-perspectives, themes, discrete events or concepts of an historical event and/or period.**

Such testimony, of course, must be integrated into the curricula and placed in its historical context as part of the historical narrative and supported by adequate documentation. Students must be prepared with the context prior to viewing the testimony and given the opportunity to reflect on it afterwards.

Maria Ecker, who was responsible for the “Das Vermaechtnis” (The Legacy) project in Austria has a number of valuable suggestions for using survivor testimony which are applicable to video testimony:

- **Seize the uniqueness of the source – If the use of testimony is restricted to listen to what the survivor narrates, the perhaps most intriguing quality of such interviews is neglected. If students are encouraged to look and listen carefully, to observe how someone narrates his/her story (facial expression, gesture, speech, melody...) they can gain valuable insights.**
- **Consider the genesis of the source – Most audiovisual survivor testimony was recorded in the 1990's. At that time the survivors had grown old and looked back at experiences which had happened decades earlier. Moreover the testimony is always the result of a communications process: the interviewer considerably influences the outcome with his/her questions and verbal and non-verbal responses to the narrative. The interview space also shapes the atmosphere and therefore the testimony.**

- Cover the entire life story – Due to time restrictions it is usually not possible reduced to dealing with the persecution. Students wish and need to learn more about the survivors' lives.

***The teachers should select appropriate segments for viewing. Students should be encouraged to view additional testimony on their own.**

Sample websites for sources for audio-visual testimony that can be downloaded:

- **USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education**
<http://college.usc.edu/vhi/>

This site has testimony in many different languages which can be downloaded, e.g.
<http://college.usc.edu/vhi/croatian>

- **Buenos Aires Shoah Museum**
www.museodelholocausto.org.ar
- **HOLOCAUSTUL**
www.idcc.ro/holocaust
- **Mauthausen Memorial**
http://www.mauthausen-memorial.at/index_open.php

Sample websites for best practices:

- **Austria**
erinnern.at (National Socialism and the Holocaust:
Memory and Present)
www.erinnern.at
- **Israel**
Yad Vashem International School for Holocaust Studies

www.yadvashem.org

- **Romania**
HOLOCAUSTUL

www.idcc.ro/holocaust