

Note on Holocaust Survivor Testimony

One of the most valuable sources of information about the Holocaust is survivor testimony. Reading, listening, or watching the story of one individual and how his or her life was changed by the events of the Holocaust enables us to personalize six million deaths, presenting the story at a level that people can grasp. We learn about families, losses, struggles to survive and struggles to carry on after liberation. In this way, survivors demonstrate how they were able to work through their emotions and move forward with their lives after the war. This kind of personal testimony is one of the best resources for teaching the human story of the Holocaust. Regardless of the format used, all survivor testimony is dependent on memory with its inherent benefits and limitations.

Although survivor interviews were conducted after 1945, they are not comprehensive histories of the Holocaust. Rather, they are first person accounts of individuals who experienced the Holocaust from a particular – often limited – vantage point. On the one hand, survivors, by virtue of their survival are part of a very small, specific group of victims, none of whom had the normative Holocaust experience, which was death. As David Boder noted while collecting early survivor testimony in 1946, the typical Holocaust experience was not represented because he “did not interview the dead.” On the other hand, their accounts are based on traumatic events, usually experienced during childhood or adolescence, and are generally recounted as fragments or as series of anecdotes within a broad chronological framework. While these personal experiences are unquestionably authentic, the historical details they rely on to support their own feelings and perceptions are not always as accurate. In addition, the structure of the interview and subsequent editing sets these testimonies apart from other forms of testimony by imposing order and form on the memories – giving them a sense of a beginning, a middle, and an end – when the lives of the survivors do not mirror that sense of closure.

One of the great strengths of survivor interviews is the ability to see the individuals react as they speak. This visual offers a nuanced perspective through subtle pauses, changes of facial expression, tone of voice, and outright displays of emotion that are not achieved through written Holocaust testimony. Students are able to watch the survivor relive these moments in their personal history and witness the effect that the memories still elicit over 50 years later.

None of this makes the survivors unreliable witnesses – it makes them survivors – witnesses to events they could neither comprehend when they were happening nor reconcile with their post-war lives. For survivors, reality is divided into three distinct and disconnected spheres – prewar, the Holocaust, and post-war – each one having no clear bearing on the others. Moreover, they struggle to describe these events – for which they lack an adequate vocabulary and for which no prewar experience could have prepared them adequately – in what are often their second, third or fourth languages and from their dramatically different postwar perspective.

Thus, while survivor testimonies tell a true story, it is a story nonetheless. They are crafted works whose anecdotes are chosen – whether consciously or because they are the ones remembered best – to demonstrate individual survival. Understanding the inherent values and limitations of survivor testimony will allow you to teach the history of the Holocaust more accurately and to personalize the experiences of the victims more successfully. For the teacher who has provided the historical context of Holocaust history, survivor testimonies provide the students with an opportunity to understand how history is *experienced* by individuals.

For further reading on memory, traumatic memory, and survivor memory you may want to consult the following sources:

Brostoff, Anita and Sheila Chamovitz. *Flares of Memory: Childhood Stories Written by Holocaust Survivors*.

Eckardt, Alice. *Burning Memory: Times of Testing and Reckoning*.

Friedman, Jonathan. *Speaking the Unspeakable: Essays on Sexuality, Gender and Holocaust Survivor Memory*.

Greenspan, Henry. *The Awakening of Memory: Survivor Testimony in the First Years after the Holocaust, and Today*.

Hoffman, Eva. *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History and the Legacy of the Holocaust*.

Kraft, Robert. *Memory Perceived: Recalling the Holocaust*.

Langer, Lawrence. *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*.

Langer, Lawrence. *Versions of Survival*.

Library of Congress Slave Narratives - www.memory.loc.gov/cgi_bin/query

Niewyk, Donald (ed.). *Fresh Wounds: Early Narratives of Holocaust Survival*.