

“Holocaust Testimonials: Bearing Witness in Holocaust Education”
A Life Stories in Education Working Group Project
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The Project

During November 2008, we will conduct 10-15 life story interviews with Holocaust survivors who have acted as educators, sharing their experiences in various public settings. We seek to understand how, when, and why survivors of mass violence have told their stories. Unlike many of the interviews that have been conducted with Holocaust survivors in the past, these interviews will focus on the life stories of these survivors, not just their wartime experiences. The questions are arranged in such a way so as to initiate reflection upon how personal testimonials have been shaped by life experiences. Concerned with the narrative structure, form, and content of survivors’ statements, these interviews seek to understand how survivors construct, tell, and retell their stories when bearing witness. What can they say in 10-15 minutes? What do they include and exclude? Have their stories evolved over time? Do they change depending on the audiences that they are told to or the places that they are told in? In what ways do audience expectations and places shape or structure what is said?

Interviewers will conduct at least 2 interviews with interviewees. The number of sessions is, of course, contingent upon interviewees’ preferences and availability and interviewees may withdraw from the interview process at any time. The location of the interviews depends upon interviewees’ preferences as well; they may be interviewed in their homes, at the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre, at the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, or at any other location of their choosing.

During the first session, interviewers will proceed with a life story interview, asking questions that will uncover the life experiences of interviewees. Each section of the life story interview guide begins by outlining a clear purpose. Interviewers may simply outline this larger purpose to their interviewees or they may ask some of the more particular questions that are listed under the purpose. It must be noted that this is just a guide and thus interviewers should not feel constrained by the purposes/questions listed here.

The last purpose in the life story interview guide focuses upon the interviewees’ testimonials. Meant to provide a connection between the first and second interview, this last point asks whether it is possible to view interviewees bearing witness, in either a public setting in the future or through a recording that was made in the past. Interviewers should leave this interview with a sense of when and where interviewees will share / have shared their testimonials. When possible, interviewees will borrow copies of testimonies that have been recorded; these will be copied at the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling and returned to interviewees in the second interview.

The second interview will pick up where the first interview finished, focusing on testimonials and specifically what kind of a place the Holocaust has occupied in the memories of survivors in the postwar period. Again, this reflective interview guide will outline a clear purpose and interviewers may then state this clear purpose or ask some of the more particular questions listed below this purpose.

Subsequent interviews may address follow-up questions arising from, but certainly not limited to, (1) the life story interview, (2) the reflective second interview, (3) screenings of interviews that have been conducted with interviewees in the past, and (4) viewing interviewees sharing their testimonials in public settings (live or recorded versions).

Interview I: Life Story Interview Guide

1. *Tell me about your life? What was life like for you before the war? Take me back to the beginning.*
 - When/where were you born?
 - What was your name at birth?
 - Describe your family and any special relationships you had as a child/adolescence.
 - Do you have any particular memories about these people/this person?
 - What kind of role did religion and/or politics play in your family?
 - Did you go to school? Tell me about this experience.
 - Did you belong to any organizations? Which ones? Tell me about them.
 - What was a typical day like for you prior to the war?
 - What kinds of sights, sounds, and smells do you remember from this period?
 - What do you think about when you hear the name of your hometown?
 - What was your neighbourhood like?
 - Who were your friends?
 - What did you do in your spare time?
 - Do you remember being happy before the war broke out? Why?

2. *Tell me about how the war changed the way of life to which you were accustomed.*
 - What was your first indication of violence in your country?
 - What did you know about Hitler and/or Nazism?
 - When did the Nazis come to power in your hometown?
 - When did you begin to feel unsafe?
 - When did the war and/or German policies/actions begin to change your life?
 - How did these changes affect your community?
 - How did you understand these changes?
 - Did you leave your home? If so, where did you go? Who came with you? How did this make you feel?
 - What was a typical day like for you here?
 - What kinds of sights, sounds, and smells do you remember from this period?
 - How did you understand what was happening to you?
 - Were you ever treated differently than others? Explain.
 - Did you ever try to resist and/or escape the actions of the Nazis?
 - How did you stay motivated throughout this difficult time in your life?

3. *Tell me about how the war changed you.*
 - Can you tell me about the weeks and days leading up to your liberation?
 - Describe the circumstances leading up to your liberation. (when, where, by whom)
 - What did it feel like to be free?
 - Who do you feel you left behind?
 - What did this experience teach you about yourself?
 - Where did you go after being liberated?
 - What was life like for you there?
 - Did you talk about your experiences after being liberated? To whom?
 - How did you recount your experiences?
 - How did others relate/respond to your experiences?

- Did others talk about their experiences? Who were they? What did they say? How did their stories make you feel?
- Did you consider yourself a survivor? Why/why not?
- Do you still consider yourself a survivor? Why/why not?
- How did you try to begin to put your life back together?

4. *Tell me about your experiences in Canada.*

- Why/when did you decide to emigrate?
- How/why did you choose Canada?
- How/why did you choose Montreal?
- What were your first impressions of your new home?
- What was life like for you here?
- Did you face any challenges in terms of settling here?
- Did you talk about your wartime experiences after coming to Canada?
- Who did you tell? How did they respond to your wartime experiences?
- Did you get any support from the Jewish community?
- Did you experience any divisions in this community related to the violence you experienced at home?
- Did you receive any support from Canadians/Montrealers outside your community? How have they treated you?
- Have you ever felt out of place here?
- Who were/are your friends?
- Did you have problems making friends?
- Do you belong to any survivor networks?
- Do you share your wartime experiences with your friends/survivor networks?
- Do you have a spouse and children? Tell me about them.
- Have you told them about your wartime experiences? What have you told them? What have you not told them?
- Have friends or members of your family seen you talk about your wartime experiences in public settings? How did they respond to your public testimonial?
- How have you made your living since coming to Canada?
- Have you ever returned to your hometown? Why/why not?
- Have you ever considered moving back permanently? Why/why not?
- Have you ever consider moving to Israel? Why/why not?

5. *Do you have a recording of one of your public testimonials?*

- If yes, ask if it may be borrowed and copied.
- If no, ask if they are:
 - (1) Planning to bear witness in a public setting in the future. If yes, gain details and ask if you may attend and record the testimonial.
 - (2) Involved with activities at the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre. If yes, gain details and ask if you may attend and record the event.
 - (3) Have ever been recorded while bearing witness. If yes, gain details about the location of the recording.

-If they have no plans to participate in an upcoming public event, ask if they would be interested in bearing witness in a public setting. If yes, we will arrange to have them bear witness in a public setting.

Interview II – Reflecting Upon Memories of the Holocaust Interview Guide

1. Interviewers may begin this interview by playing a clip from the testimonial that they obtained from their interviewees at the end of the first interview. They may proceed with their own questions about the testimonial or they can ask some/all of the questions listed below. Note that interviewers may introduce a clip and/or a question about a clip at any time.
2. *Bearing Witness – Tell me about sharing your story with others.*

In Private Settings – Tell me about how you have shared your story in private settings.

- Do you and your family speak about the Holocaust and your particular experiences? Why/why not?
- Are any other members of your family Holocaust survivors? Do you share a special bond with them? Do you reminisce about your experiences? Why/why not? What do you speak about? What do you choose not to speak about?
- How do you and your family members speak about the Holocaust?
- What have you told your wife? What have you told your children and other family members?
- What have you not told your wife? What have you not told your children and other family members?
- Do some members of your family know more about your experience than others? Why?
- Is it difficult to discuss your experiences with family members?
- How have your family members responded to your story?
- Do you have any other family members or friends with whom you reminisce about your experiences? Who are they? What do you speak about? What do you choose not to speak about?

In Public Settings – Tell me about how you have shared your story in public settings.

- When did you begin to speak publically about your wartime experiences?
- Why did you do it? Why do you continue to do it?
- How frequently do you share your story with others?
- Is it difficult to share your story? Explain.
- Are there times when you have tried to avoid thinking about your past? Why/why not?
- Which parts of your story do you tell? Do you recount your whole experience or just parts of it?
- Which parts of your story are more important? Which are least important? Explain.
- Which parts of your story would you like to forget? Do you tend to leave these parts out of your testimonial? Why?
- What did it mean to be a survivor when you arrived in Montreal? In the 1960s? In the 1970s? In the 1980s? In the 1990s? In 2008?
- Has your public testimonial changed over time? How?
- Do you feel like your public testimonial does justice to your experiences?

Place – Tell me about how various settings have shaped your story.

- Where have you told your story?
- Do you have different versions of your story?
- Do different venues lead you to tell different stories?

- What do you tend to speak about? What do you tend to leave out?
- Do you prefer to tell your story in certain venues? Explain.

People – Tell me about how various audiences have shaped your story.

- Who do you share your experiences with?
- How have your audiences responded?
- Do you alter your story when speaking to different kinds of audiences? Why? How?
- Does your story change when you speak to Jewish audiences and non-Jewish audiences? Why? How?
- Do you prefer a certain audience over others? Explain.
- Do you think that audiences have a variety of expectations? What are these expectations? Do you tend to meet these expectations?
- How is your story viewed inside the Jewish community? How is your story viewed by those outside of the Jewish community?

Experiencing Others Bear Witness – Tell me about how other survivors' experiences have shaped your story.

- Have you seen others share their public testimonials?
- What was the first testimonial you heard? Describe this experience. Where was it? How did it make you feel? Did it impact the ways in which you tell your story? How?
- Did you relate to this public testimonial? Why/why not?
- Did you feel as though these people had left important parts out of their stories? Explain.

Interviews – Tell me about how you share your story in an interview setting.

- Have you ever shared your story in an interview setting?
- Who did the interview? When was the interview conducted?
- Do you have a copy of the interview?
- Did you feel satisfied or disappointed after the interview? Why/why not?
- Has the way you tell your story changed since this interview?
- What, in your opinion, makes a good interview?

3. Material Culture – Tell me about any possessions that help you share your story.

- Do you have any scrapbooks, photographs, newspaper clippings, and/or artifacts that may help you tell your life story? Will you share these with me?
- Have you ever donated any of your belongings to the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre? Which items did you donate? Why?

4. Commemoration – Tell me about any other ways that you have remembered your Holocaust experience.

- Have you been involved with the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre? How?
- If yes, does your involvement allow you to share your stories with others? What story do you share? To whom? What parts of your story do you choose not to share?
- What do you think of the centre's permanent exhibit?
- Has your story been included in it?
- Do you feel like the exhibit is representative of your experience?
- Have you been involved with any other commemorative centres and/or projects?

- What do you think of media/performance portrayals of survivors? (i.e. films, theatre, literature)
- What do you think of media/performance portrayals of your community's wartime experiences?
- Are any of these portrayals representative of your experience? Why/why not?

5. *Education – Tell me about how you view Holocaust education.*

- How do you think your stories and those of your community can be expressed through museum exhibitions, theatre performances, media, and in the classroom?
- How would you feel about participating in these kinds of performances?
- How would you feel about making a short film about your experiences for the National Film Board's CITIZENshift program?
- What would you most like others outside your community to know about your experiences?