ENSURING THAT THE SURVIVORS’ STORIES ARE HEARD

“...I was August 1942; I was 14 years old. There were rumors that the end of the Radom ghetto is near. I wanted to stay with my family, but they convinced me to use my work pass to leave the ghetto. My mother and sister Chaya walked me to the Ghetto gate. When we reached it, my mother whispered to me, ‘If there is anyone in the family with a chance to stay alive, it is you. azoy ist beshert — this was meant to be.’ She turned to me and handed me a sealed cup she had been carrying. She began to cry silently and hugged me tightly. She said, ‘Take this little cup with you. You will have a sweet life.’ I removed the string and paper to the side so I could see inside. I was shocked. Of all things, the cup was filled with honey. Who could find honey these days? I started to protest, for they would need this more than me, but I saw in her eyes that she meant for me to have this cup of honey. I gave Chaya a final hug and she kissed me. After I passed the Jewish policeman at the gate, I looked back at my sister and my mother, who was trying to smile. This is my last memory of them both; they were transported to Treblinka the following day with the majority of the Ghetto Jews, among them one of my two brothers and his wife.”

When Eliezer Ayalon recounts this intimate, painful moment of separation, its impact on audiences is visible. And this is indeed his purpose. Ayalon uses his personal story to help people connect to the narrative of the Holocaust and better grasp what it was like to be a Jew during those dreadful years. (His book of memoirs, A Cup of Honey, was published in 1998.)

For 30 years now, Ayalon has been sharing his Holocaust memories with students, adults, journalists, teachers and politicians from Israel and abroad. He is one of 40-50 witnesses who give live testimony at Yad Vashem, though the names on the roster change over the years. They provide this testimony either as guides who escort guests through Yad Vashem’s Holocaust memorial as part of educational seminars and workshops, personalizing the general narrative using their own experiences, or as part of the preparation for an organized trip to Poland.

“The Holocaust survivors have been loyal partners since Yad Vashem was established, often referring to it as their second home. Many times they were more willing to participate in new initiatives than subsequent generations, because they are interested in ensuring that the topic is relevant to today’s youth and future generations,” says Yad Vashem Spokesperson Iris Rosenberg.

In the 1990s, having survivors tell their stories became part of Yad Vashem’s educational work. “The Holocaust is not statistics or large-scale processes,” explains Avner Shalev, Chairman of the Yad Vashem Directorate. “It is a story and another story and another story of victims, the large majority of whom were murdered. It is hard to identify with a process, but you can empathize with a personal experience. That is why the testimonies are the backbone of our educational work.”

An outward expression of this approach can be seen in the new Holocaust History Museum, which opened in 2005, where the collective story of the many is intertwined with the experience of the individual.

A sense of duty

Becoming a witness is not a straightforward decision. Holocaust survivors, for various reasons, typically shied away from the topic, and it was only in later years that they started opening up, both to strangers and to their own family. Giving live testimony is a difficult ordeal, as Yaacov (Jacki) Handeli explains: “When you talk about it, you start to live again the days of the concentration camp, but you want people to know. You have to convey this knowledge, to tell them the true story.” The dominant reason for choosing to be emotionally exposed is the sense of duty and obligation the survivors feel toward the ones that were murdered.

This is what brings Martha Weiss to tell her story,
despite the emotional toll. Martha Weiss was only ten years old when she reached Auschwitz Birkenau from Czechoslovakia with her 13-year old sister Eva in late 1944. One of the memories she shares is of the day the Red Cross came for an inspection to determine whether Auschwitz was a concentration camp or, like the Germans claimed, a work camp. To prepare for the visit, the infamous Nazi SS Officer Dr. Josef Mengele, who was in charge of the infirmary, turned it into a “real” hospital by injecting most of the patients with a lethal poison, cleaning and upgrading the decor, and dressing some of the inmates as nurses. Satisfied, the Red Cross representatives were on their way out when one of the women dressed as a nurse called out, ‘Don’t you see, I am not a nurse! This is a façade that was prepared for you! Go behind the barracks and see the pile of dead bodies that were injected in the heart just two hours ago.’ Mengele convinced them that she was, in fact, a mental patient who believed she was a nurse. After they left, as a lesson, Mengele injected the woman with petroleum and made everyone in the camp watch as she slowly died in excruciating agony.

As horrid as this event is to recount, let alone live through, Weiss does so routinely – to expose people to the cruelty and inhumanity of the Holocaust and to tell of the experiences and heroism of the people who did not survive, such as the poison-injected patients and the courageous “nurse.” She explains, with tears in her eyes, “I do this primarily because the last thing any person who was about to either be murdered in the gas chambers or about to die as a muselmahn or from beating said is ‘If you survive, please tell the world what happened.’” Weiss, who had been telling her story for years in Australia, joined Yad Vashem’s group of witnesses shortly after making aliyah in 1998.
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For Handeli, who is originally from Salonika, it is particularly important to commemorate the Jews from his country of birth. “My purpose at Yad Vashem, which is a second home to me, is to educate people about what happened to the Jews of Greece. Because when you talk to people, they think that what happened was in Poland, where there were about 4 million Jews, but there were also the 74,000 Jews of Greece, out of whom 96% perished, including my father, mother, three sisters and two brothers.”

A survivor of the Baron Hirsch Ghetto in Salonika, Auschwitz, Buna and a death march to Bergen Belzen, Handeli has been sharing his story for four decades now. He is often called upon to talk to Sephardic Jews and visitors from Greece as well as from Spanish and Portuguese speaking countries. Handeli recorded his memoirs in the book A Greek Jew from Salonika Remembers.

Relying on testimonies

To help prepare survivors to tell their individual stories, the Yad Vashem International School for Holocaust Studies offers a “You Gave Me a Reason to Live” seminar each year. Initiated by Holocaust survivor Hana Greenfield and guided by Amcha psychologist Moshe Harel Sternberg, the program has coached more than 500 witnesses in its 20 years of operation.

In addition to Yad Vashem’s moral responsibility to help witnesses fulfill their personal mission, Shalev also notes the importance of the testimony as a document that helps in the reconstruction of a complicated and intricate historical period. “There has been an extreme change in the way survivor testimonies are viewed by researchers and writers. In the first years after World War II, testimonies were considered a subjective source with questionable reliability, and researchers based their work mostly on documents. Today, the whole world is writing history from the point of view of the individual. This includes notable Holocaust historian Christopher Browning, whose latest book, Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp, relies mostly on testimonies.”

On occasion, witnesses have the misfortune of coming face-to-face with anti-Semites and Holocaust deniers. In such instances, the survivors play a vital role as living proof, and, at times, are even able to make a difference. “I tell people they have to take notice of what Ahmadinejad says. We are now at the stage that the Ahmadinejads of the world are saying that it never happened, that we are making it up, in spite of all the evidence. I can only imagine what they will do when we are dead,” warns Weiss.

The current projects underway at Yad Vashem, Shalev points out, will ensure the continuing relevance of Holocaust remembrance to the Israeli public as well as to Jews and non-Jews throughout the world, where it is extremely important in light of the latest developments of new anti-Semitism.

Looking ahead

Fully aware that their numbers are slowly dwindling, the last generation of first-hand witnesses of the Holocaust are more anxious than ever to get their messages across. “In 10-15 years, there will be no survivors that can utter the simple words, ‘I was there and I experienced this,’ stresses Ayalon. “The world must remember the extermination camps, not because we seek to arouse pity and compassion for ourselves – it is too late for that – the world needs to know about hunger and starvation today and about those who perished, to denounce the insanity of genocide and the ugliness of war and the banality of evil. You must speak out against prejudice, bigotry, racism, baseless hatred, because silence can kill – through the Holocaust we have seen how silence can kill millions,” he warns his audience.

Yad Vashem is preparing for the inevitable day when there will be no Holocaust witnesses left. It has been increasing its testimony database by more than 1,000 per year in recent years – four times that of previous years. It has even raised special funds from donors and secured funding from the Israeli government toward this cause. In parallel, it is working to obtain materials from other video libraries. To date, Yad Vashem has on record more than 102,000 video, audio and written testimonies, the largest collection in the world.

Yad Vashem’s vision is to ensure that future generations continue to partake in Holocaust remembrance based on an understanding that it is important for the existence of the Jewish people and meaningful for them as human beings. As part of this mission, it has been developing new Holocaust pedagogical programs suitable for all ages and national backgrounds.

Adjusting to the changing media and educational landscape, special efforts are being made to enhance online offerings and their accessibility and to incorporate the social networks into Yad Vashem’s educational outreach platforms. With the aid of Google, Yad Vashem has already made the entire 130,000 images from its archives available online. This is the initial step towards making Yad Vashem’s vast archives easily accessible to a global audience.