Using Survivor Testimony to Teach the Holocaust
by
Moshe Harel-Sternberg

Each year, on the tenth of Tevet (around January) or the twenty-seventh of Nissan (around April), when Israel officially commemorates the Holocaust, we ask survivors of the Holocaust to tell their eyewitness accounts to a class or group of classes. In recent years, we have encountered a growing number of survivors who are willing to visit schools, community centers, army bases and various localities, for this purpose. Each year, the same educational questions arise, such as:

- How does one prepare the class to hear this testimony?
- At what age is it advisable for schoolchildren to meet with Holocaust survivors? At the primary level? the junior-high level?
- How does one prepare witnesses to deliver their testimony? What should they include and what should they omit?
- How long should the testimony last? half an hour? an hour? two hours?
- Should the speakers be given a time limit?
- Is it “permissible” to stop the witnesses before they have finished their testimony?
- What should one do if the witnesses burst into tears? If the students burst into tears?
- Should several survivors be invited to give joint testimony?
- Is it important for the students to ask questions? What will happen if they do not ask questions?
- Is it important for us to create a dialogue between survivors and students? How can this be accomplished?
- Should one invite witnesses at any time, i.e. not necessarily on the tenth of Tevet or the twenty-seventh of Nissan?
- Is it useful to invite one witness to address one class several times during one school year? Why?

These questions express some of our educational considerations in inviting Holocaust survivors to speak with various classes. Eleven years ago, in 1988, the International School for Holocaust Studies offered a special course that trained Holocaust survivors to speak before various kinds of audiences. The course was initiated by Hannah Greenfeld, a Holocaust survivor from Czechoslovakia who now lives in Tel Aviv and Shalmi Barmore, the former director of Education at Yad Vashem. They believed it necessary to encourage survivors to present their testimony to various audiences. The workshop included the following elements:

1. Scholarly lectures by Holocaust researchers on Holocaust themes;
2. Visits to Yad Vashem, focussing on the Valley of the Communities and the Art Museum;
3. A workshop in rhetorical techniques, filmed on videotape, in order to allow the survivors to observe excerpts of their testimonies.

The centerpiece of the program was the rhetorical-techniques workshop (three hours per day). The term “rhetorical techniques” refers to a method of delivery called
“Efficient Presentation” – a recognized method in which topics are presented in the most efficient manner to a given audience. Efficient Presentation has been used in business and marketing affairs, interpersonal relations, and teaching and education. This method was adapted for the special target population of Holocaust survivors, on the assumption that they, too, if they wished to present their personal accounts and succeed in their task, should obey a small number of crucially important rules:

1. The center of the account is the audience, not the personal testimony. It is true that the witnesses have come to tell their personal stories, but they must establish ties with the audience and take account of the listeners’ age, intellectual and emotional level, sensitivity or tiredness, and the time allotted.

2. Because educational settings give the witnesses a limited amount of time to recount their stories, they cannot tell everything. Therefore, to prepare the witnesses, our course includes a rehearsal in which they present five-minute segments of testimony, each having a beginning, middle and end. We teach the witnesses to focus on the central account rather than on peripheral details, general events, or historical minutiae. Survivors who have not spoken before audiences find this rule especially difficult to honor and are strongly driven to tell everything. We try to equip such witnesses with “brakes” so they will know when to stop, when to abridge, and how to focus their personal stories around a few elements instead of trying to embrace the entire World War II period. Without discipline, the witnesses will lose their audience halfway through.

3. The personal testimony must be tailored to the target audience. In recounting their personal stories, the witnesses should stress elements that are suited to the various age groups and conducive to the formation of a speaker-audience relationship. Obviously, the witnesses will not deliver the same lecture to a third-grade class and a group of eleventh- and twelfth-grade students, or to a group of soldiers and an audience of non-Jews or Germans. There is no single story that will suit all of them. Witnesses sometimes need a certain degree of spontaneity in order to adapt stories to the target audience, but if they know in advance who their target audience is, they may prepare their accounts accordingly. Be this as it may, our course attempts to provide the witnesses with tools to help them carry out this task.

4. The witnesses should attempt to create a dialogue with the audience by asking questions or encouraging the audience to ask them questions. Such a dialogue eliminates obstacles and fears, creates a connection between witnesses and the audience, and makes the audience emotionally more receptive to the survivors’ accounts.

5. Survivors who have not yet had the experience of testifying before an audience of “strangers” (anyone other than close relatives) need support and encouragement to develop the self-confidence necessary to communicate to diverse audiences in various languages.

Before analyzing the conclusions with respect to these courses, several facts must be presented. Since 1987, the International School of Holocaust Studies has held over twenty survivors’ seminars for more than 300 participants. These courses have provided us with approximately 800 short excerpts of videotaped testimony. Each one is five – six minutes long, in which survivors describe their lives and families before and during the war: the ghettos, camouflage using Aryan papers, concealment with Aryan families and in monasteries, labor and death camps, the end of the war,
liberation, and the return to life. Although these are short excerpts, each constitutes a testimony in its own right and proves that the survivors can tell an entire story with a strong emotional impact in several minutes. At the International School, we use some of these clips in our in-service courses for various groups.

Did the survivors who participate in the seminar attain their goal? Were they able to internalize principles? What did the seminar teach us, the facilitators?

We had feared that the survivors would find it hard to accomplish these tasks – because of painful wounds from the past, difficulty in opening up before strangers, advanced age and natural anxiety about facing an audience. In this respect, the seminar participants surprised us favorably. Each seminar began with resistance to the “methodology,” that is to say, the segmentation of their testimony into small chunks. In the course of the seminar, we asked each participant to prepare a segment for a hypothetical audience, such as:
- a group of hesder soldiers (yeshiva students doing army service);
- elementary and junior-high teachers;
- groups of German teachers who had come to Yad Vashem for two-week seminars;
- an ulpan for recent immigrants;
- a group of fourth-grade students;
- the second generation (children of survivors);
- a conference of media people;
- a group of priests and nuns visiting Yad Vashem for a two-week seminar;
- a group of students at a teachers’ college.

Even though the audience was composed of seminar participants only, each survivor was able to visualize the recounting of his or her personal story to one of the groups on the list. It was here that the survivors made their most extraordinary and moving revelations.

They all managed well, telling exactly the “right” story, in their own way, for the group they had selected. For example, the father who had asked his son to lay tefillin, and the son who refused because he was too tired; a package of cheese; the survivor who furtively ate a sausage at the food depot of the Lodz ghetto; the girl in Paris who came home after curfew; a small doll that a girl kept in her possession throughout the war; a couple who returned after the war to reclaim their daughter from a Polish family; a fourteen-year-old who hid in a cupboard during the "great aktion" in the Warsaw ghetto; a story about “Samson” of Bochnia (Poland) – before the war, in the ghetto, in Auschwitz, and subsequently in Israel; the songs that were sung in the Vilna ghetto; recitation of Shema in the Zdunska Wola ghetto in Poland; and the woman who survived Auschwitz and makes wedding gowns today.

The survivors had to achieve a degree of verbal ability in order to tailor their accounts in the best way possible, and they succeeded far beyond our expectations, despite the objective difficulties I mentioned. The participants also taught us, the facilitators, lessons in magnanimity, simplicity, common sense, and mutual assistance under inhuman circumstances; thirst for life and vitality in the most difficult situations, and the will to endure. We met survivors who had reconstructed their lives in Israel despite the suffering they had experienced, and who continued to create, build, and live. We also learned that despite their advanced age and history of trauma,
Holocaust survivors could be given difficult tasks and be called upon to show self-discipline, which they were able to achieve in all respects, and function as outstanding students in an intriguing experiment with many educational implications.

After we conducted six such seminars, we broached another, very audacious idea: a “graduate” course. Thus, in 1992 we held a five-day graduates’ course for those who had completed the first course and wished to fine-tune their skills in personal delivery.

We decided to invite real groups to attend each day of the survivors’ workshop. At first we chose four or five survivors from the larger group and asked them to present five-minute episodes before these “live audiences”. We tried to make the groups as diverse as possible during the five days of the course. We brought in new immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Histadrut employees who had been sent on missions to Germany; eleventh- and twelfth-grade classes; students in teachers’ colleges; employees of various departments of Yad Vashem; and soldiers of various kinds (officer candidates, NCOs in teaching and education, and members of staff units).

The survivors were asked to diversify their stories. Some were asked to speak only of their lives before the war, others to describe the war itself, and still other to talk about liberation and their arrival in Israel. Each day, four or five survivors presented each group with a broad spectrum of personal stories, arrayed from “light” to “heavy,” ending with a positive account of life after liberation.

We divided the encounters with the “real” groups into three phases:
1. listening to four or five testimonies: 20-30 minutes;
2. questions from the audience and formation of a dialogue between witnesses and audience: 45-60 minutes;
3. a spontaneous encounter between the entire group of survivors (about twenty people) and the audience, in which the audience could approach the survivors and ask them to provide further segments of their personal accounts.

One survivor sat with two or three people from the audience; another sat with just one and continued to tell his story. The only rule in this phase was that the survivors were not allowed to leave the room; they had to outreach and to interact with the audience. The listeners, in contrast, were allowed to leave the room if they wished. This encounter lasted for another hour or so, but the time allotted was very flexible.

The climax of the graduates’ course was the dialogue that we strove so vigorously to create in the encounters between the survivors and the various audiences. In a standard encounter between a Holocaust survivor and any audience, the survivor usually speaks and the audience listens. The audience rarely poses questions in the middle of the testimony, let alone afterwards.

This silence occurs for many reasons, irrespective of the nature of the audience. By the time the survivor finishes the testimony, the listeners are often in shock or, at the very least, embarrassed and puzzled about what questions they may ask, if any. Occasionally, after most of the audience has left, a few visitors approach the witness and ask to hear more about his/her personal story, thus turning the survivor into “archive exhibits” that manage, with greater or lesser success, to vivify a few pages of history. We wished to introduce the survivor to the audience above all as a person...
with a painful human story to tell, but with whom one could strike up simple human contact.

In the years 1992-1999, the International School offered nine graduates’ courses with over 150 participants. These courses were much more complex and stressful than the other activities. We did not always know which groups the survivors would be facing. The survivors themselves experienced tension because of the very fact of having to confront unfamiliar groups along with several other survivors. During the question and answer period, the survivors had to demonstrate a large measure of spontaneity in order to respond succinctly to complex queries.

What did the graduates’ courses teach us? It taught us that survivors could address audiences as members of a team and engage various audiences in a dialogue. Those who met with the participants described the encounters as extremely moving and different from their previous interaction with Holocaust survivors. The very conciseness of the stories, told in succession and spanning the pre-war, and post-war periods, evoked more emotion than a single hour-long testimony. The listeners emphasized the question phase, in which they were able to achieve an intimacy with these survivors that they had not experienced in previous encounters with survivors. For the past two years, we have used teams of survivors for teachers’ in-service activities (junior-high and senior-high levels). Such encounters include meetings with the teacher participants, creation of a dialogue, and a session with the participating teachers’ students. In the summer of 1995, we asked such teams of survivors to address audiences of teachers’ college students and overseas educators, in English and French seminars at the International School. Videotapes of the encounters show teams of four or five survivors recounting one experience from a specific ghetto in Poland or Lithuania, questions from the audience and the survivors’ answers, and, finally, the spontaneous encounter between survivors and audience.

After the second phase of the graduate course, we held Phase III, focusing on encounters between survivors and audiences composed exclusively of pupils in grades four through nine. Phase III, held in 1993, was attended by sixteen graduates of previous courses, who specifically wished to address younger audiences. During the five-day course, the survivors met with three classes: grades nine, six, and four.

How does one address young audiences? What does one tell them? We chose a combined approach. Sometimes the survivors prepared brief accounts for various audiences; sometimes the entire encounter was devoted to questions from the audience and brief answers by the survivor team. It transpires that younger pupils are less embarrassed or anxious about asking questions. They ask so many questions and display so much interest that the survivors are more moved by the youngsters’ behavior than by the answers they attempt to give. We learned that not only is it possible to arrange encounters between Holocaust survivors and youngsters in an educational setting, but that we must begin to do such work with even younger children as long as the witnesses are aware of what they may and may not tell them. Such encounters give rise to a “grandparental” relationship, as though grandmothers or grandfathers were telling personal stories to their own grandchildren. Not all survivors are psychologically willing to cope with young pupils, but those who are able offer the potential of adding a new and interesting dimension to Holocaust teaching at the elementary and junior-high levels.
It is hoped this workshop will assist and inspire any teacher and educator who confronts the questions posed at its beginning. The various survivors’ courses may fulfill in some fashion, *mutatis mutandis*, the last will of the Jewish historian Simon Dubnow. Shortly before he was murdered in the Riga ghetto, in December 1941, Dubnow implored those surrounding him, “*Yidn, shreibt un farshreibt* [Jews, write it all down, record everything]!”

It is incumbent upon us to bring the stories of Holocaust survivors to as varied and as large an audience as possible.