EXTENDING THE LIFE OF SURVIVOR TESTIMONY

Irving Roth

History that is taught in the classroom setting is often a litany of dates, events and locations. While this is useful, it does not always provide a clear image of the circumstances and people involved. Modern technology has helped to dramatize the events of the Shoah and yet the interpretation of the material by its producer can be problematic. Students are inclined to question the accuracy and validity of such material. Personal, survivor testimony is extremely successful in transmitting and reinforcing Holocaust information to students. Seeing and hearing a living witness makes the history come alive for the student. They identify with both the survivor and the events.

Due to the advancing age of the survivor population and concern over the retention of this legacy, the “Adopt a Survivor” program has been implemented in two Jewish schools. It pairs a survivor with one or more students in order for the student(s) to become an integral part of the life of the individual life in all of its stages. The survivor and student discuss prewar life and lifestyle, social and educational experiences for Jews and non-Jews prior to and through the Holocaust, liberation and the “establishment” of a new life in a new location.

This workshop will detail the philosophy behind the various aspects of this program along with the effects and obligations upon the students who undertake this project.

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"Zchor V'lo Tishkach" Remember and Thou Shall not Forget!

A CHASIDIC TALE:
A great Chasidic Rabbi took his disciples into the forest where he prayed with them, sang and danced and built a great fire. The disciples watched in awe as they began to catch the fervor of the rabbi. They too began to dance and sing around the fire. They followed the rabbi into the forest year after year. When the rabbi died, the Chasidim did not remember the prayers but still went into the forest, built a fire, sang and danced but the spirit of the rabbi did not enter their souls. As the Chasidim aged and could no longer sing and dance, their children went into the forest and built a fire but could not dance because they did not absorb the spirit of the dance of their fathers. They sat around and gazed into the fire in silence. The next generation did not remember why their fathers went into the forest nor what they did there. And so the spirit of the rabbi, his prayers, singing and dancing and the fire were a thing of the past. Few if any remembered his greatness or his existence.

BACKGROUND:
The survivors of the Shoah remember the life that once was; the great Jewish communities that produced Torah scholars, Yeshivot of great learning and piety, Halachic Jewish life, major religious and secular writings, Yiddish Theater and uniquely Jewish music. They remember the hardships that they endured in the Ghettos. Each survivor can recount the round-ups, the deportation, the unpleasant smells in the cattle car, the arrival in Treblinka, Majdanek or Auschwitz, the separation from father and mother and the smell of burning flesh. All this was seared into their memory. For decades they did not speak of their experiences, for fear that it would not be believed and it would traumatize their children. The second generation knew they were different from other children. There were secrets. Few had any grandparents or relatives. Some had "landslite", people from the same place with similar experiences. The third generation is American or Israeli. They are proud, strong and free. How will they tell the story of the Shoah? How will the world know what happened to six million Jews who disappeared in a period of four years? How will they tell of the thousands of cities and villages where Jewish life existed and Torah was taught? They may read a book or even look at a video, but where will the spirit and passion come from?

The insight and spirit of the survivor must be transmitted to the third generation - the grandchildren of that generation. They are the last ones to have direct physical contact with survivors. They must absorb what is within the soul of the survivor. The third
generation must adopt a survivor and become their alter ego. Today, and fifty years from now, they must be able to stand in front of students and adults and retell the life story of their adopted survivor with feeling, passion and accuracy. It is through the eyes of the third generation, immersed in the life of the survivor, that living history can be truly transmitted without the bias and agenda of historians.

PROGRAM SUMMARY

The adoption program proposed requires a pairing of a survivor with one or more students. To become an integral unit, the students will become knowledgeable with the following recommended areas of the survivor’s life:

- History of the country where the survivor was born and lived pre-war
- Relationship between Jews and non-Jews during the 19th and 20th century, prior to WWII
- The lifestyle of Jews in general and the survivor's family in particular
- Detailed knowledge of parents and grand-parents, with specific anecdotes
- The religious, social, educational and economic life of the Jewish and non-Jewish community
- Details of the survivor’s life from earliest recollection to point of transition (1930s)
- Transition to 1945 (oppression, ghetto, hiding, concentration camp, partisan etc.)
- Liberation, return to home, D.P. Camp, waiting to immigrate to Palestine or America
- Life in a new land - housing, job, education, marriage, children and grandchildren
- Thoughts on life relationships with others, prayer, Judaism, religious observance, and reconciliation.

This project is envisioned as a one-year program. Each student will develop a relationship with the survivor that might culminate in a trip to his or her place of birth, and his odyssey through Ghettos, concentration camps, liberation, D.P. Camps and immigration to their present environment.

For this program to succeed it is necessary to bring together three sets of people. They are educators, students and survivors.

- Educators within their institution must have a deep desire and commitment to Holocaust education.
- Students who are properly motivated will have the desire to do research via direct interview and discussion with survivors as well as examine sources relating to the life of the adopted survivor.
- Survivors who live within easy access to students and who are willing to share the facts as well as the spiritual and emotional aspects of their life before, during and after the Shoah should be selected to participate in the program.

An informal setting is preferred so that sharing of sensitive dialogue and information can flow easily. Nevertheless, some structure is essential in order to collect and retain the facts while absorbing the spirit and soul of the survivor. The teacher / facilitator must be extremely sensitive to the feelings of the survivor since it involves personal and painful experiences.
**SPECIFIC STEPS**

Discussions between principal, director and teacher are necessary to establish and monitor the program. The project will work best in a school where the Shoah is part of the curriculum. Once basic guidelines have been established, the teacher will then meet with potential students and introduce the project, its urgency and requirements. It is preferable that the project is an elective and satisfies student requirements. In this way, the students will feel that they are participating in an important program while deriving immediate benefit “course credit” at the same time.

Meet the students who signed up for the program and present the objectives, areas of the survivor’s life, specific methodologies to be utilized and the anticipated results of the project. While there are no written examinations for grading, consideration should be given to an oral presentation by each student on the life and experience of the survivor plus a written journal. An invitation should be extended to staff e.g. the principal, department chairperson and others, to hear the presentation. This was done very successfully in two schools during the pilot program.

Meet with survivors from local areas and elicit volunteers for the project. (Generally, I have found survivors are eager to participate.) Do not emphasize the trip aspect of the program since many survivors are reluctant to return to their former country. Explain in great detail, the purpose as well as the methodology of this program. The survivors need to understand that it involves more than handing over videotapes produced by the Shoah Foundation or other organizations to the students.

During the first meeting between survivors and students, ask each survivor to introduce him/herself with a brief biography. Before the meeting, make sure that the survivor is aware that he/she will speak to a group of students. The introduction should be short, about 10 minutes. Following the survivor introduction the students will also introduce themselves and state why they are interested in the project and what they hope to achieve. This, too, should be no more than 10 minutes per student. Keep the meeting informal. During the meeting the teacher / facilitator should monitor the interaction between specific students and survivors as a prelude to pairing students and survivors.

One or more students can be paired with one survivor. In the experimental program, individual or up to three students were paired with one survivor. Only the students should be present while the pairing process takes place. Some students will chose a particular survivor based on the short biography that the survivor presented as well as his personal characteristics. It is recommended that the student not be related to the survivor e.g. grandfather, uncle, etc. By adopting a relative, they would enter the project with preconceived notions about the survivor and may not ask deep and probing questions. The survivor, too, would be reluctant to discuss some personal issues.
Contact survivors individually and inform them as to the specific student/s they are paired with. Establish a time for the first meeting. Students are required to keep a journal in addition to audio and video taping.

The teacher / facilitator should meet with the students as a group on a regular basis, once a month, to discuss progress, issues and possible difficulties they may have with the program or survivor. Facilitators must review the journal, tapes and videos to provide guidance to the students. They should also touch base with the survivors, individually, to gauge the progress he or she is making with the student/s.

The above program is based on two very successful pilot programs that were initiated during 1998-99 school years in the US. Both “Adopt a Survivor” programs were with Jewish students; one in an orthodox yeshiva and the second in a Hebrew High School. In both cases there was no problem getting local Holocaust survivors to participate. In fact, there were very eager to be adopted.

Arrangements have been made to begin the “Adopt a Survivor program” a public high school on Long Island during the 1999-00 school year. Discussions have been also held with principals with other high schools who expressed great interest in this program.

“ADOPT A SURVIVOR” PROGRAM IN GERMANY AND AUSTRIA

Over the last few years, German and Austrian towns and cities have invited Jewish survivors from their vicinity for a sponsored visit. These visits have been successful in that there were meetings, ceremonies and festivities. In some cases, Jewish places of worship were rebuilt and small museums established. While these visits are useful in recognizing that there once was a Jewish presence, it, in no way gives the young people a sense of whom these people were, what contributions they made and why they left without a trace. Certainly, there will not be a legacy once the survivors die.

I might suggest that the basic idea of inviting a survivor be utilized in the “Adopt a Survivor” project. When the survivor visits the town, he spends most of his time with the students in a conversational setting. This could establish a long-term relationship between the students and survivor. Correspondence, whether regular or e-mail, could be established so that the student’s questions may then be answered on an ongoing basis. This type of relationship with a living survivor would provide the students with insight as well as a desire to probe and research why Jews left their homeland. It would then become part of the history as well as the fabric of the town. The students become biographers who can speak on the subject of the survivor and the Holocaust. They will see Jews as individual human beings rather than some amorphous mass.

SUMMARY
Based on the results of the two pilots programs one can conclude that the concept of “Adopt a Survivor” is viable and the initial results are most gratifying. The program provided a personal connection between survivor and student. This connection can serve as a bridge toward the teaching of the Shoah by these students to the next generation. The material available during the workshops from two participating students is a sample indication of their understanding, connection and commitment to the project. These same students were the centerpieces of the Yom-Hashoah commemoration at their synagogue this year. Both schools are planning to continue and expand the program next year. One of the additional major benefits is that the students are given lectures on varies aspects of the Shoah as part of the program to gain an in-depth understanding of the historical events. The lectures cover the history of antisemitism, the rise of Nazi Germany and the Third Reich. The Holocaust period covers details of the concentration and death camps, resistance and rescue. The post Holocaust period covers revisionism and reconciliation.