

---

Professor Lester

16 May 2006

Fictional Representations Vs. Factual Testimonies In Holocaust Work

These people's stories are epic. They are not simply sharing stories with me; they are sharing a history too rich and important for words. While I don't think such in depth learning should be a requirement, my personal enrichment has been amazing. It might take a unique personality or maybe a hardened outlook to watch survivor tapes, and some days I cannot stomach the history and pain these people shared. It is a difficult topic that perhaps many people do not want to personally witness. I cannot blame people or demand them to understand and take in this material. I started reading Holocaust material in elementary school and was a volunteer for "Daniel's Story" in high school. I also remember a survivor speaking to my 4<sup>th</sup> grade class and seeing his camp tattoos. Others may not have had these introductions and need to ease into understanding such caustic material. I cry when I see the Holocaust memorial in Boston. The concept and impact are amazing and horrible. I've visited a couple of times and am always overcome with emotion. One cannot be hardened by the material, but must find an acceptable middle where one can feel and still work with the material successfully.

Because the Holocaust is a difficult topic to discuss, likewise Holocaust art is equally difficult to decipher and dissect. As personal feelings and histories cloud one's perceptions, the opinions and reactions to Holocaust art receive mixed reviews not necessarily based upon merit but upon the viewer's own biases. As I review Holocaust literature against personal testimonies, I bolster my support for the genre and its grand

and often great replication of real-life horror. Themes and patterns develop in personal testimonies that are accurately portrayed by survivor literature as well as second-generation writers. With the knowledge gained from the Mid West Center for Holocaust Education, the Holocaust literature becomes more obtainable, real, and heartbreaking in itself. While other students may doubt or find the literature hard to take, I find the literature to reaffirm the testimonies. The testimonies are not art themselves, but allow art to be made from their stories.

The Mid West Holocaust Center for Education is equipped with several mediums of Holocaust education. The office is located within the Jewish Community Center. Within its own office, the MCHE employs a handful of people who work on documenting the stories of local survivors. It is this documentation that I transcribe.

The office that I work in is actually the library and material section. With a whole wall dedicated to books, video, and other materials on the Holocaust, the office has many learning materials that I am free to browse and borrow. It appears to be a very complete collection of material for those wanting to learn more about a certain subject such as a specific camp, person, or time period. I have not checked out any material, but I always scan the literature for ideas and themes.

In this little enclave are a TV and VCR player. I watch the personal video accounts of local Holocaust survivors. I watch these videos and transfer the original, handwritten transcript from the session into a computer document. Making these videos easier to access for researchers is the main purpose of my task. I make sure the times match up with the new topics as I watch the video then type the document. This system allows me to watch the tapes in depth and do something useful for the center. The tapes

are twelve years old and have not been technologically updated. Historically and emotionally, these tapes hold endless value. These tapes hold such important memories for the specific person, their family, and humanity as a whole. Their testimonies mean so much to history, and I feel unbelievably privileged to have access to these amazing personal accounts. They have certainly changed me as a person in ways I'm sure I notice throughout my life. Dr. Fran told me watching the tapes only gets easier because I'll start to see them as history. I do see them as history, but as a horrible event that ruined people's lives.

The survivors aren't engaged in conversations with an interviewer. They simply start at their beginning and tell their life story. The interviewer does little prompting, but in general they tell their story. Sometimes I want to look away. Sometimes I can't believe the stories and the horrific things they saw and experienced. Each tape I watch the more I know, but there's so much more. I was initially surprised how different each survivor's stories are. Because each person's story is so different, I can't imagine or predict the next person experienced. <sup>in that</sup> The stories are so vast from traveling to Pakistan to escaping through Shanghai, <sup>each tape holds a unique story.</sup> The tragedies are always the human losses, but the survivor's lost everything. All families lost everything- businesses, valuables, art, and everything possible. After these people survived the Holocaust, they returned to nothing. Survivor's experiences are also dependent on age and status in life. Survivor accounts differ by age and generation. Child survivors and children of survivors are two separate things. The differences between age groups impact their stories immensely. Child survivors discuss how the Holocaust shaped their whole lives. Families experiencing the Holocaust together may even have completely separate accounts.

Chana Sanders' testimony exemplifies a woman's experience and how that would innately differ from a man's.. After surviving Bergen-Belsen and a Death March, Sanders worried that she would never be able to have children. She worried that the Nazi's injections and medical testing had made her sterile. Because the malnourished women did not menstruate while in the camps, many feared their abilities to have children perished while they survived. Mrs. Sanders broke down during her testimony while recounting a story she heard from a friend that Nazis threw babies into fires. She lived in fear that if she were to have children that they could eventually be taken away from her and killed. Survivors never overcame these horror stories, one survivor mentioned how she would often reflect upon the horrors when she had a down moment. Mrs. Sanders also recounted a story of children being separated from their parents in sorting lines and hearing them call out for their parents, crying. Mrs. Sanders' not only feared being able to have children but also what could happen to her children should a Holocaust happen again. Mrs. Sanders had three children, her first before she immigrated to the U.S.

As Cynthia Ozick accurately portrayed the woman's perspective from two different characters in her short story "The Shawl." Ozick's characters Stella and Rosa although sharing their experiences side by side share separate feelings and concerns. Rosa put all her efforts into keeping her baby alive while producing no milk and starving. Stella simple concentrated on receiving the motherly attention of Rosa. Ozick wrote, "They were in a place without pity, all pity was annihilated in Rosa, she looked at Stella's bones without pity. She was sure that Stella was waiting for Magda to die so she could put her teeth into her little thighs" (Ozick 897). After watching the testimony describing killing children and infants, I realized that Ozick's writing was able to capture the

intimate details of watching one's baby killed. Ozick is able to tell the story that I would prefer to believe is fiction. But Mrs. Sanders and other survivors remember those occurrences vividly and know them to be true.

The most haunting tape I watched was of child survivor Ralph Berets. Dr. Berets was in hiding for most of his childhood and gave testimony of his story and its overall affect on his life. He remembers his childhood most vividly and horrifically. From nightmares from repressed memories to panic attacks at the sight of German police officers years into his adulthood, Dr. Berets gave an eloquent testimony to the horrors of the Holocaust. He also recounted that his older sister didn't retain any memories from their years of hiding. In hiding the family had many close calls with police as well as horrible living situations in chicken coops and eating little food. The Berets' family supported the families that hid them. These strangers who saved their lives kept in contact with the Berets in the next generation as well. After the war, ~~The~~ Berets' financially supported and paid for the college educations of the family that helped them throughout the Holocaust. While it seems that the Holocaust illustrated some of the worst human atrocities, there are also thousands of stories of unbelievable kindness from friends and strangers in effort to save lives. I found myself relating Dr. Beret's stories to different themes and studies. His psychoanalytic dreams and ego defense mechanisms will forever haunt him. People who have experienced such extreme fear and trauma may never be able to live a life free of their past.

Elie Wiesel's Bildungsroman, Night, was an easy comparison to Dr. Beret's childhood. Their stories are much different and they experienced different things at slightly different ages, but the overall affect of trauma and the way they describe their life

long struggles are quite similar. While a survivor at a much younger age, Dr. Berets never had a childhood. Wiesel's survivor story shares a similar theme in stolen youth and a life shaped by the Holocaust. Both Wiesel's and Berets' lives were forever within the context of surviving the Holocaust. Older survivors may recall happy early memories of family and life, but child and youth survivors lived through horrific times before their sense of self had really developed. Weisel wrote on this type of impact. He said, "Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven time cursed and seven times sealed...Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God himself. Never" (Weisel 904). These men have such strong testimonies based on their early experiences. Berets did not make a proclamation to "never forget" but from his testimony it is apparent that he is unable to forget even the most vivid details of his experiences.

From not experiencing a childhood to seeing one's parents killed, the child survivors feel life long pain. Older survivors experience similar feelings, but also have a better sense of the accounts due to the age in which they were experienced. It's also interesting to hear each person's unique story. Heartbreaking, horrifying, and poignant, the survivors often experience an emotional breakdown while being filmed. I, too, have a difficult time watching these personal accounts and am often haunted throughout the day. Just as many of the survivors witnessed the concentration camps, spent time in hiding, or saw children thrown from buildings, I am now a witness to their stories. Dr. Fran told me that memory is a tricky thing that often doesn't hold up over time. I cannot take these testimonies at full face value. The facts such as dates and amounts cannot be wholly believed, but people's reactions to retelling their stories is closest to the truth.

Many survivors also spoke of their language barrier. By the time the survivors came to the States, English was often their third or fourth language. Language barriers as seen in Sidney Nyburg's short story, "The Chosen People," impact relations between people. Mrs. Sanders recounted a story when she came home from the store with dog food because she couldn't read the label. Her neighbor showed her by barking and pointing at the cans. Mrs. Sanders would also not eat out before she learned how to order food in English. Most of the survivors, depending on their age, speak with heavy accents. As I watch the testimonies, I read the transcripts for clarity on cities and other foreign words they may reference. I am an outsider when I watch the tapes. I do not know the Holocaust history well or the names of camps or cities in Poland or Germany. The survivor and the interviewers are able to communicate well, but I am sometimes in the dark. Language is vital in communicating these stories, and the survivors realize this. They also realize they might not always be understood, so they often stop and spell out European cities for the interviewers to document their story correctly.

The beginning of the semester provided little links to my service-learning project. With the exception of learning about Jewish culture and practices, I had little to share or add to class discussions that related to my topic. The more we read and learning about Jewish history allowed me to connect my Holocaust knowledge to that of class discussions. I am pleased with my project and feel that this life opportunity will add to my knowledge about life in general. A more historical background given in class on the Holocaust would have allowed me to place these people within a time. This background would have strengthened my connection between the past and present discussions of the Holocaust.

After reading the immigrant stories at the beginning of the semester, I had an idea that America was hard place, better than the homeland but not ideal. Almost every survivor shares how glad they are to be in the U.S. Post World War II sentiments towards Jewish people were still hostile. All the Polish survivors left Poland as soon as possible never to return again. Anti-Semitism did not end with the war but continued as survivors attempted to reassemble their lives. Many survivors had friends and neighbors tell them to not even look for surviving family members. The survivors express unbelievable thanks to be in the States. They started here with virtually nothing developed into valuable community members. Their appreciation and value in a country with established freedoms and level of acceptance is immense. After surviving the Holocaust, America did seem like the land of freedom. None of the survivors I watched recounted any stories of anti-Semitism after coming to America, but they must exist. Language barriers carried over from Europe, and English was often the third language learned for survivors. Perhaps their foreign language and heavy accents led to anti-Semitism but none of the survivors I watched spoke of this. Anti-Semitism in the States was probably so much less than what the survivors were used to. Many spoke of the horrible anti-Semitism they experience directly after the war. Once immigrated, the survivors were very busy. These experiences happened at such speed that no one really had time to stop and think about the past. Moving to a new country, learning a new language, starting families, all of these things pushed survivors forward.

While the work and knowledge is valuable, my advisor picks and chooses my next testimony with care. Dr. Fran Sternberg is amazingly helpful in the skilled path she has made for me. She carefully eased me into the survivor testimonies and always shares

information and hints about not only her life and Jewishness but also how others work as well. As a professor herself, Dr. Fran guides me carefully into difficult topics and testimonies. Dr. Fran is open to any questions and comments I have as well as giving me a general idea on current topics. She is so kind and caring that I was immediately accepted into the office (not too mention often fed breakfast). Dr. Fran's parents are survivors, and she will drop little hints about how that has affected her life. People whose parents were survivors share a deeper understanding and perspective on the Holocaust than further generations. I have known Dr. Fran's son for a year and have had many in depth conversations with him over our beliefs and ideals. I was very surprised to learn that his mother was Dr. Fran. She and I discussed this, and she said that her sons have never had much interest in being Jewish. I found that its not that they aren't interested, it's more like they are tired of it. This is their history, these are their grandparents and family members that were killed. They have heard these stories all their life and unlike me, they have known these people all their life. The spectacle has worn off. That's just who their family is. They are tired of it, and more often than not, don't want to discuss it anymore.

The purpose of documenting these stories is to have a permanent copy of a non-permanent memory. The MCHE represents over fifty survivor memories for educational purposes. From learning about the personal experiences of survivors to collecting research on certain aspects of history, the tapes have multiple purposes and uses. By taping only local survivors, MCHE has an oral history of people from Kansas City. They are people from our community who have chosen to share their life with their community. By focusing on one's community, the MCHE makes teaching and learning

I think it is more complex. Read 1185 Park Avenue to see how writer it makes people who accept this culture. I was

about the Holocaust accessible to following generations. The survivors bring the stories from another continent and share them for mid-westerners who might be previously unscathed by the Holocaust. While the testimonies are heartbreaking and horrible to watch, the history is too important to be neglected. The survivors apparently agreed.

Well, your essay is indeed improved!  
Thank you for taking the trouble to  
develop your reflections and report  
on your experience at MCHÉ.  
You were a respectful and dedicated  
volunteer, who carried away in meaning  
what you contributed with your labor.  
You developed a terrific relationship  
with your supervisor as well. Nicely done!

12/15

**Criteria for Final Draft, Oral Presentation, Final Revision**  
**ENGL 336 AMS 344 Jewish American Literature and Culture**  
**Professor Cheryl Lester** **Spring 2006**

**Service Learning Research Projects**

- Drafts of Final Papers, Due 18 April
- Oral Presentations, 18 April – 9 May
- Final Paper Revisions, Due 16 May at 1:30pm
- Final Exam (based on Oral Presentations), 16 May, 1:30-4pm, 212 Blake

**Your final paper draft should:**

- Analyze your service learning experience as an identity-shaping practice (for Jewish American and non-Jewish Americans alike)
- Describe the Jewish organization with which you worked
- Discuss aspects of the organization that make it uniquely Jewish American
- Explain the service you provided
- Assess the impact of your experience on your relation to Jewish American life
- Demonstrate a meaningful connection between your discussion of the text and course materials, issues, or themes we have studied as a class
- Reflect revisions based on comments and suggestions from earlier papers
- Be 9-11 pages long, including the works cited page
- Follow MLA style guidelines
- Be polished and relatively free of errors

*develop the meaning of your illustration*

**Grading Rubric (0-3 points for each item for a total of 15 points):**

**0=Not adequate      1=Acceptable      2= Good      3=Excellent**

**Your final draft**

<u>3</u>	follows the assignment (length, content, style, presentation)
<u>2</u>	revises your former papers in response to my written and oral suggestions
<u>2</u>	reflects on the process of Jewish American identity formation
<u>3</u>	draws on relevant service-based information and experience
<u>2</u>	makes meaningful connections with course materials, issues, and themes

12 =

**Your oral presentation should:**

- Reflect your unique strengths and skills (as a speaker, graphic designer, discussion leader, etc.)
- Be well-organized
- Offer specific information about your service learning
- Make effective use of appropriate audiovisual aids (blackboard, power point, etc.)
- Solicit questions (orally and/or in writing) and offer some responses
- Be polished and error-free
- Include eye contact with your audience
- Be loud and clear enough for everyone to hear and understand
- Not exceed fifteen minutes including Q & A

**Your oral presentation**

- 3 follows the assignment (length, organization, clarity, presentation)
- 3 communicates specific and relevant information about your final project
- 3 links your project to processes of Jewish American identity formation
- 3 makes meaningful connections with course materials, issues, and themes
- 3 engages your audience

15 =  
Excellent

**Your final paper revision should:**

- Reflect revisions based on comments and suggestions from me to your draft
- Reflect revisions based on comments and suggestions from me and/or your peers to your oral presentation
- Be 9-11 pages long, including the works cited page
- Follow MLA style guidelines
- Be polished and relatively free of errors
- Include your final time sheets and supervisor evaluation forms

**Your final paper**

- 3 follows the assignment (length, organization, clarity, presentation)
- 3 enhances our understanding of how Jewish American identity is shaped in literature, culture, and community life
- 3 makes an informed argument by referring to course-, community-, and text-based research
- 3 is revised in response to my written and oral evaluation of your final draft
- 3 is revised in response to questions or comments on your oral presentation

15 =  
Thank you!