

IF YOU COULD LICK MY HEART, IT WOULD POISON YOU:
ORAL TESTIMONY AND HOLOCAUST MEMORIALIZATION IN THE U.S.

By

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To my family and friends who made this all possible

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I thank all of the people who made it possible for me to complete this project, not only my family and friends, but also the people who allowed me into their lives and their memories.

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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This study will look at how the current use of oral testimony in traditional and non-traditional education reflects the problems with the way the Holocaust has been memorialized in the United States, and how it can be used to create a more historically accurate public memory of the Holocaust. Over 52,000 taped testimonies of Holocaust survivors, bystanders and perpetrators sit in archives around the country and very little work has been done on how these testimonies are being used or what they can tell us about the Holocaust. Drawing on recent oral history theory and Holocaust studies and incorporating first person interviews with both Holocaust survivors and teachers, this thesis will demonstrate what a valuable resource these testimonies are for the future of Holocaust memory in the U.S. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of the interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

CHAPTER 1 ORAL TESTIMONY

If you could lick my heart, it would poison you.

–Itzhak Zimmerman, Warsaw Ghetto Fighter, *Shoah*¹

In the past few decades, thousands of museums and memorials have opened, films produced, and novels published dedicated to the Holocaust. Both reflecting and spurring this growth, states across the country have created education mandates, recommendations, and commissions supporting the teaching of the Holocaust in schools. As general awareness of the Holocaust spreads throughout the U.S., more attention must be paid to understanding what messages these projects convey to the public, why they have come to be memorialized, and whether the messages help clarify or distort the Holocaust. Scholars disagree as to whether popular films that people flock to see and novels that climb the New York Times Bestsellers List can do justice to the memory of those who suffered through or died in the Holocaust. How much of the suffering, humiliation, degradation and loss experienced during the Holocaust can people understand from a stylized film like *Schindler's List*? Or from a popular novel like *Number the Stars*? What are the implications of creating short easy-to-digest lessons from the mounds of survivor testimony available? How are teachers to approach and evaluate the thousands of materials available to them?

Intense debates surround the study and use of the Holocaust in American public life. Is the Holocaust unique? Or simply one genocide among many in the twentieth century? Who should be included in commemoration efforts? Was the Holocaust a Jewish tragedy or a universal one? How can we come to terms with what have come to

¹ This epigraph was drawn from Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*.

be called the perpetrators, victims, and bystanders? All of these questions underlie the larger question of how the Holocaust has come to be represented in popular culture, museums, and academia, and whether “representing” it is even possible. The way the Holocaust is portrayed on film, TV, in novels, documentaries, and in museums shape the way politicians, educators, and the general public think and feel about the tragedy. The packaging of the Holocaust for a mass audience has led to the reduction of the Holocaust into easy to digest sound bites and clichés. A vast gulf exists between the public and private memories of the Holocaust. The easy lessons that have been created to make the Holocaust understandable and palatable to the public do not line up to much of what individuals remember about their experiences during the Holocaust. Examining how and why the public memory of the Holocaust looks the way it does and comparing it with the research done on oral testimony will demonstrate how wide the gap between the public and private memory of the Holocaust is, and how their memories have been used to support that public memory. The juxtaposition of the two illustrates clearly that a lack of understanding exists between what the public is being asked to remember and what survivors are often conveying.

The political post-war life of the Holocaust in America has created a push for the Holocaust to be taught in public schools. Five states, California, New York, New Jersey, Illinois and Florida, have mandated that the Holocaust be taught in schools, while several more have written legislation encouraging the Holocaust’s implementation in the classroom, and museums, both major and small, continue to open across the country dedicated to promoting the memory of the Holocaust. As Holocaust education becomes more popular, national curriculum, teacher institutes, and online lesson plans have

become increasingly available for teachers' use. In the U.S., the Holocaust has become a commodified product designed to teach people "lessons" about intolerance, pluralism, and morality. The resources currently available for teachers reflect these widely held popular beliefs.

Many scholars would argue the way the Holocaust is taught today often allows students to learn from the Holocaust more than about it. Without knowing what specific events led to the Holocaust, students are left with an incomplete understanding of how and why such a seemingly incomprehensible event could have happened. Since Holocaust studies comprises the largest collection of material (written, oral, and video) collected about one event, and an incredibly complex one at that, room for investigation exists. With such a large amount of material about a century-defining event, abuses, simplifications, and misunderstandings can easily become the norm. Responsibilities exist to the memory of the dead, those who share their life stories, and also to future generations, to carefully consider what lessons should, and can, be taken from the study of the Holocaust. Scholars need to question what lessons have been taught about the Holocaust up to this point and whether the current memory of the Holocaust gets anyone to remember anything of significance.

One of the most compelling and emotionally engaging tools teachers use to reach students is Holocaust survivor testimony. Teachers report in interviews, in Samuel Totten's anthology on Holocaust educators, and in the treatises of famed Holocaust historians that students who care little to nothing about what they learn in school, respond to survivors stories, whether they actually have a living person visit their classroom or they watch a short passage clipped from a longer interview. In popular

documentaries and lesson plans for schools, survivor testimony has been subject to the same treatment as other popular Holocaust materials. Survivor stories, like the lesson plans, films and novels available, have been used to talk to students about topics as varied as bullying, intolerance, overcoming obstacles, having hope for the future and the vigilance necessary to guard democracy.

Survivors are often invited into classrooms and larger events to meet with students to tell their stories first hand. In places where it is more difficult or even impossible to invite a survivor to visit, clips from interviews of survivors are often shown as a way to help students connect a human face to the abstract tragedy about which they are learning. At the USHMM, the last thing visitors see before leaving the exhibition space is a small theater running survivor interviews in a loop with a similar effect. Beginning the late 1970s and gaining speed in the mid 1990s, organizations began the effort to collect testimony on tape for posterity. Survivor testimony's popularity began to rise along with a general Holocaust consciousness, and the use of these survivors' stories, whether in person or on tape, become subject to the same impulses in American culture that have shaped Holocaust memory in the films and novels students watch and read in class. Both psychologists and historians have begun to closely examine what these tens of thousands of interviews can tell us about the Holocaust.

Judith Miller ends her chapter on the Holocaust in the U.S. in her book *One, by One, by One* by noting the growth of organizations collecting survivors' stories in the 1980s. As a general awareness of the Holocaust grew in American consciousness, so too did an interest in those who lived through it and had vast stores of knowledge to share. For Miller, writing in 1990 before the USC Shoah Foundation began collecting

and disseminating its massive collection of video testimony, these testimonies “help shatter public myths”² – the myths discussed above of hope, redemption, and resilience - that have become attached to the Holocaust. Sidney Bolkosky describes how his students were able to “reach a new depth of understanding” after viewing testimony.³ His comments highlight the emotional impact such testimony can have on people. Trying to fathom the murder of millions of individuals is an impossible task, but having the opportunity to hear one single person’s story, to learn about their life, can help build a bridge between the overwhelming statistics of death and the real people who experienced the Holocaust. Survivor testimony should continue to be used as an educational tool, but should be done so more thoughtfully than is done today.

This study will look at how the current use of oral testimony in traditional and non-traditional education reflects the problems with Holocaust memory in the United States, and how oral testimony can be used to create a more historically accurate public memory of the Holocaust. It incorporates current Holocaust scholarship, oral history theories, as well as interviews with Holocaust survivors and teachers in Broward and Miami-Dade Counties about their goals for teaching the Holocaust. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of the interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement.

Oral history has become an important part of how the Holocaust is told and remembered. Survivor testimony belongs to the discipline of oral history, a discipline that reaches back to Thucydides, but became easier with the invention of the tape

² Judith Miller, *One, by One, by One* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 269.

³ Sidney Bolkosky, “From the Book to the Survivor,” in *Working to Make a Difference: The Personal and Pedagogical Stories of Holocaust Educators Across the Globe*, ed. Samuel Totten (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), 7.

recorder in the twentieth century. Defining what oral history means, the recording of an individual's life history, the transcription of that story, or the research method involved. Oral historian Valerie Yow argues that oral history requires all three.⁴ Throughout the twentieth century, oral history, "the interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction," has changed the way history can be done.⁵ Oral history has allowed historians and sociologists access to the thoughts, minds, understandings, and experiences of those whose lives are not captured in the documents kept by elites. Most of the survivors of the Holocaust lived out their lives as ordinary people, outside the intellectual elites who write history. The capturing of these people's stories on tape has led to the largest collection of oral testimony about any single historical event in history. How they can be used to convey that history remains open for study.

Historians and other academics create the discourse that will trickle down through museum exhibits and curricula used in classrooms. Illuminating the dark depths of this very human tragedy falls on their shoulders. Without careful research into what these tens of thousands of interviews can tell us about the Holocaust, those who lived through it and how to convey that meaning to others, American Holocaust education will continue to provide a historically inaccurate picture of the Holocaust to both the public and survivors. Writing about his experiences from as early as the 1970s, famed Holocaust survivor and author Primo Levi wrote of the "gap that exists and grows wider every year between what happened 'down there'" and the imagined Holocaust in novel

⁴ Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2005), 3.

⁵ Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, Introduction to the Second Edition to *The Oral History Reader: Second Edition* (London: Routledge, 2006), ix.

and film. He wrote, "It slides toward simplification and stereotype, a trend against which I would like to erect a dike."⁶ Levi wrote these words before the Holocaust and its memory had become commodified to the extent that it has today. The memory of the Holocaust has only become further divorced from the experience of men and women like Levi.

The Rise of Oral History

Oral history is the oldest form of history keeping on earth. Ancient people passed their stories down through the ages orally, and today, some cultures still rely on this method of information transmission. In the western world, an emphasis has been placed on paper documentation over the spoken word. Court documents, diaries, official government records, train schedules, propaganda posters, church accounts, have long been privileged over people's reminiscences in academic circles.⁷ Memories were seen as fallible and too constructed by the present to be of use in understanding the past. The social upheavals of the second half of the twentieth century- movements to promote civil rights, women's rights, minority rights- brought attention to the importance of the "little" person in history. The oppressed, the downtrodden, the victims of history have not often been given a voice in the official documents long prized by academic historians. Oral history became more popular as the voices of those long silenced became more vocal. Some historians began to realize the value in listening to those they had long ignored. New avenues of inquiry opened, new insights into the not-so-distant past could be found, and a new acknowledgement of the elitism in the historical process was acknowledged.

⁶ Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Vintage International, 1988), 157.

⁷ Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 12.

The rise in popularity of survivor testimony follows the general trajectory of social history in the U.S. in the twentieth century. Academics began to look to the common man as a source for historical inquiry in the 1960s at the same time the Adolf Eichmann trial began in Israel. Instead of relying on court readings as done at the Nuremberg trials, the prosecution at the Eichmann trial called upon living witnesses to testify against Eichmann. Robert H. Jackson, the head prosecutor at Nuremberg relied on the reading of hundreds of documents to establish his case. Gideon Hausner, the prosecutor for the Eichmann trial noted in his memoirs that while this paper documentation was invaluable, it failed to reach the hearts of men. For Hausner, the use of survivor testimony would allow people to approach the horror the Nazis had inflicted in a way that paper documents could not. The Nazi system would not remain a “fantastic, unbelievable apparition,” but would be something that had happened to actual people.⁸ Survivors’ knowledge of the Holocaust was not valued until after the Eichmann trial when they were brought as witnesses in the case against Eichmann. The growth of social history along with an awareness of how little understanding of the Holocaust existed gave survivors a greater voice in both Israel and America. Their testimony gave the public new access to the Holocaust. Survivor testimony shattered the idea that European Jews had gone meekly to their deaths, an especially popular view in Israel.⁹ It was in the wake of the trial that people who lived through the Holocaust began to be called “survivors.” The testimony of the 111 witnesses during the trial demonstrated for the public how truly horrific the Holocaust had been for people in their everyday lives. Not only did the Eichmann trial allow the survivor a chance to

⁸ Annete Wieworka, “The Witness in History,” in *Poetics Today* 27, 2: *The Humanities of Testimony* (Summer 2006): 390, accessed April 7, 2012, doi:10.1215/03335372-2005-009.

⁹ Franklin Foer, “Why the Eichmann Trial Really Mattered,” *The New York Times*, April 8, 2011.

speak about their experiences, it also demonstrated how oral history can change the public's view of the Holocaust and create a new memory. As social history in general and oral history in particular gained legitimacy in academic circles, the Holocaust began to become a part of American popular culture. The survivor's voice became an important part of Holocaust memory, but it was often used in a way that echoed the popular depiction of the Holocaust on film and in novel. The public gave survivors a voice, but then did not take the time to listen to them closely.

The Promise In Oral History

Taped oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors offer scholars and educators an opportunity to show students the human face of the consequences of hatred, bigotry, and genocide. Claude Lanzmann's nine and a half hour masterpiece *Shoah* demonstrated the understated power of what oral history has to offer the future of Holocaust studies. Simone de Beauvoir said about the 1985 film, that while the masses of accounts read about ghettos, deportations, and camps seemed to answer questions about the Holocaust, Lanzmann's extraordinary film showed that "no one actually understood anything."¹⁰ This powerful film allows viewers a glimpse of the pain survivors have experienced. Watching even just a few minutes, viewers will see survivors break down while remembering their pre-war lives and time under the Nazis. Those watching *Shoah* cannot help but feel intense pain when Abraham Bomba, a barber at the death camp Treblinka, breaks down while telling of the time his friend found his dead wife when cutting the hair off corpses in the camp. Seeing the emotional impact living through the Holocaust caused men like Bomba can help people recognize

¹⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, "Shoah," in *Claude Lanzmann's Shoah: Key Essays*, ed. Stuart Liebman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 63.

the lingering effects of the tragedy. Liberation did not offer many survivors an escape from the horrors they had seen, only from its daily physical experience. Bomba's story gives a counterpart to the overarching American story of picking oneself up and leading a happy and productive life.

At an epic length of nine and a half hours, Lanzmann is able to show extended interview excerpts, including narrative meanderings and emotional breakdowns. Such a luxury is not often offered in a more traditional film setting, especially for use in the classroom or museum theaters. Lanzmann's film represents a unique way to use oral testimony, and while debates exist about its biases and methods, most scholars believe his extended interviews edited so that the survivors' pain shows through, do not offer the possibility of redemption after the war and provide viewers a deeper look at survivors' lives and memories than many other documentaries that make use of oral testimony. The content of the interviews – their subject matter, story arch, and detail – create this feeling.

It is essential for further study to be done on how Holocaust testimony has been used up to this point. Academics, researchers, and education evaluators need to ask questions such as: What questions have been asked of these testimonies? What questions were asked during interviews? How have they been presented? Analyzed? Broken up?¹¹ An interview's initial circumstances and its later editing determine the color, tempo, and message of the piece. Careful attention must be paid to how the material is presented to the public in order to create effective educational materials that

¹¹ Joann Weiner Rudold, "Research Uses of Holocaust Testimonies," in *Poetics Today* 27, 2: *The Humanities of Testimony* (Summer 2006): 456-457, accessed December 23, 2012, doi:10.1215/03335372-2005-013.

will have an impact on how people think about the Holocaust, their own prejudices, human rights, and historical understanding.

For example, Lawrence Langer has spent years studying the testimonies housed at the Fortunoff Video Archive, and believes that the history of the Holocaust can only truly be learned through careful study of these histories. After spending countless hours listening to harrowing tales of death, deprivation, humiliation, and sorrow, Langer has attempted to find a way to make sense of the stories told. He contends that so much of the story of the Holocaust, the details of daily life in small towns, ghettos, deportations, and camps can only be understood through these testimonies. So much of the record cannot be found in the documents left behind by the Nazis or even the diaries and photographs from the people who did not survive the Holocaust. In his view, every individual's story fills in a small gap in the knowledge missing from the paper record.¹² He does not disregard the concern about the factual accuracy of memory, but he asserts that this does not negate their value. With a thorough background in the history of the Holocaust, a historian can easily sift through misremembered dates and other minor factual problems.

Langer wrote a treatise on what he considers the different kinds of memory found within the videos that will help explain what survivors try to convey. Langer creates a framework where analyzing Holocaust testimony becomes possible. Langer's approach explores the inconsistencies and idiosyncrasies within testimony, and the difficulties inherent in collecting it. Langer relates the story of a man telling an interviewer in graphic detail about the murder of a man who stole some bread. He loses himself in the

¹² Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 103.

horror as his wife leaves the room and the interviewer stops the interview.¹³ This story demonstrates what Langer calls “deep memory”, the sensory memory of the Holocaust that lives within each survivor, and the deeply disturbing material that can be found in survivor testimony. This man’s story- an integral part of his memory of the Holocaust- would not fit within the more popular memory of the Holocaust in schools and museums. At their best, oral testimonies “represent a crucial treasury of reliable texts for understanding the implementation and consequences of mass murder.”¹⁴ Knowing how to use the valuable resource oral testimony offers is essential for educational programmers to address the needs of those who have shared their testimony and those who want to learn from it. A closer examination of the tools educators use can help clarify the goals of such an education and can help create a new, more thoughtful memory of the Holocaust.

Oral history practice has the potential to allow for a shift in the focus of historical inquiry of any time period, not just the Holocaust. In the case of the Holocaust, oral testimony allows a change in point of view from the perpetrator to the victim and from the intellectual elite to the common man. Oral history practice and its focus on upending the status quo brings new eyes and creative approaches to its study. One of its important facets is not just that it changes where the focus of historical inquiry lies- from elites to those often left out of official documents- but it also brings an entirely new approach to history. Oral history requires collaboration with the subject of inquiry and brings the meaning of an event to the forefront. Paul Thompson argues that while sometimes oral histories can add factual information to our understanding of an event,

¹³ Ibid., 27-28.

¹⁴ Laurence Langer, *Using and Abusing the Holocaust* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006), 98.

its importance lies in how it allows people to approach what an event means.¹⁵ What does the Holocaust mean to those who lived through it, those who watched it happen, and those who carried it out? And how can that affect how an event is understood? Historians and psychologists have the unprecedented opportunity to study the tens of thousands of interviews already captured. No such collection has ever existed. Seriously engaging with testimony will put to rest the messages commonly attached to the Holocaust, of resilience and overcoming obstacles, or as Robert Kraft terms it, the public's tendency to see survivors as having come out of "the darkness" or "the ashes".¹⁶

An Important Note

Oral history, of course, is not completely unproblematic. While it offers opportunities for exploring different interpretations of history and memory, it does present issues for scholars analyzing it. Oral historians must contend with issues of memory not intrinsic to contemporary documents, and some scholars remain wary of approaching Holocaust memory with a critical eye. The trauma of the Holocaust and the trauma many survivors go through recalling it has led some scholars to approach all Holocaust testimony with a less critical eye than when they look at other forms of documentation. Lawrence Langer, an important figure in the study of Holocaust oral testimony has been criticized for not bringing a critical enough eye to his approach to Holocaust testimony.¹⁷ Langer, James Young notes, has been tempted to let the

¹⁵ Paul Thompson, "The Voice of the Past: Oral History," in *The Oral History Reader Second Edition*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 26.

¹⁶ Robert N. Kraft, *Memory Perceived: Recalling the Holocaust* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc, 2002), 143.

¹⁷ James Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 168.

testimony speak for itself without interpretation. But, interpretation is necessary if the collection of oral testimony is to be useful for understanding the Holocaust. A lack of scholarly attention can lead to misrepresentations. Analyzing an oral source for historical accuracy does no disrespect to the person who gave it. The temptation to allow testimony to speak for itself does not grant oral testimony the respect it deserves. As Geoffrey Hartman argues, oral testimony requires interpretation just as written documents do.¹⁸ Careful interpretation of survivor testimony, of the same level brought to more traditional documents, increases the understanding scholars have of the effects of the Holocaust. Survivor testimony can serve to deepen the public's encounter with the tragedy of the Holocaust while also offering a more thoughtful and complicated view of the past than the one currently popular.

Traditionally, scholars have been wary of oral testimony. Unlike written sources, individual's verbal reminiscences were seen as illegitimate and lacking in factual accuracy. As a new wave of social history grew in the 1960s, attention began to be paid to the untapped resource offered by oral testimony. Scholars began turning to oral history as a way to capture the experiences of those often marginalized in historical inquiry – women, minorities, the poor and working class. Listening to people tell their own stories allowed historians new insights into the past. In the wake of World War II, as scores of survivors emigrated from war devastated Europe, people did not want to hear survivors' stories.¹⁹ It was now time to look to the future and rebuild broken lives. As time passed and the Holocaust gained a prominent place in American culture, the survivor became an important resource for understanding and teaching about the Holocaust.

¹⁸ Ibid., 170.

¹⁹ Kraft, *Memory Perceived: Recalling the Holocaust*, 143.

In academic circles, however, the privileging of written documents over oral ones continues to plague oral historians. Conventional historical inquiry often depends on multiple documents that confirm the information in the original. Often documentation does not exist and only one or two survivors remain from ghettos, towns, or even from entire camps.²⁰ Scholars must realize the value in each story. For example, Lanzmann's *Shoah* has interviews with the only two survivors of the death camp Chelmno in Poland.²¹ Without their testimony, the details about the space and experience of the camp would be lost. Reliance on Nazi generated documents alone can never give a complete picture of the Holocaust and how it was experienced by those subjected to it. Not only do Nazi documents and photographs present the victims as the Nazis saw them- vermin to be exterminated- scholars have found evidence of documents that purposefully provide false information about numbers of those murdered. All of the documents relating to the running of the extermination camp where over 150,000 people were asphyxiated in gas vans cannot give the same details as these two men's interviews.²² The eerie scene that opens the film of a man paddling a boat down a river singing the song he used to sing as a prisoner of the Nazis and then describing his experience under their rule gives a bone-chilling look at the effect of the Nazi system on those crushed under it.

The use of oral history also allows those without an intellectual pedigree – people like Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, and Charlotte Delbo – an outlet. By giving voice to and

²⁰ Tony Kushner, "Holocaust Testimony, Ethics, and the Problems of Representation," in *Poetics Today*, 27, 2: *The Humanities of Testimony* (2006): 275, accessed on December 23, 2012, doi: 10.1215/03335372-2005-004.

²¹ Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah*, Produced by Historia, 1995.

²² Kushner, "Holocaust Testimony, Ethics and the Problems of Representation," 275.

analyzing others' testimonies, scholars have access to information about small towns, ghettos, and the experience of deportations from all across Europe by those who lived through it, not those who perpetrated it. The massive collection of taped testimonies offers scholars the opportunity to explore new avenues of inquiry.

Oral Testimony and History

In the case of the Holocaust especially, oral history can provide factual information about the past. When more often than not only a handful of people from any town or village lived, survivor testimony adds a wealth of information about camps, ghettos, small towns and villages that would otherwise be lost. An excellent example of this is the case of Rudolf Reder, a man chosen to live and work as a mechanic at the death camp Belzec in eastern Poland. Historians estimate that seven people lived after deportation to Belzec out of an estimated 400,000, only two of them from inside the camp itself. Most escaped from outside the camp or from the train taking them to the camp. One of the men was murdered in 1946, but Reder lived and gave a graphic account of what occurred in Belzec and later testified at the trial of some of Belzec's alleged guards.²³ Reder's testimony provides a glimpse into the terror that reigned in the death camps of Poland that is almost impossible to find because of the lack of survivors. His testimony can be contrasted with Nazi documents to give a different perspective of life and death within the camp. Reder not only demonstrates how information can be gained from survivor testimony, but also allows for a look into what the Holocaust was like from the Jewish perspective. Nazi documents and photographs will only show the

²³ "The Belzec Trials", Holocaust Educational and Archive Research Team, last modified 2007, accessed March 1, 2012, <http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/trials/belzectrials.html>.

victims as the Nazis saw them, not human beings trying to cope with the insanity around them.

Oral history holds promise not just in its potential to explore the meaning of an event or to give details of an experience. It can also open new areas of inquiry previously thought impossible to penetrate. Father Patrick Desbois, a French Catholic priest, has travelled the western edge of the former Soviet Union speaking with elderly locals about the war and uncovering mass graves. The exact location of these graves and the number of dead buried within them were thought by many to be lost to history. Father Desbois and his team have uncovered well over 500 mass graves and counted the number of bullet casings to estimate how many people are buried in the graves. In this instance, oral history did not only provide scholars and the public with access to the stories of those who have come to be called bystanders, but has also added valuable information about the numbers of people murdered by the Nazis.²⁴ The success of Father Desbois's project relies largely on the trust he and his team are able to build between themselves and the men and women who have long been reluctant to share their haunted memories. Without trust that Father Desbois and his team were there to learn and listen and not simply judge or confirm their own ideas, many of these people would have gone to their own graves without giving account of their experiences during the war.

The examples provided by Reder and Father Desbois demonstrate the power oral history has to enhance and possibly change our understanding of how we see and remember the past. Father Desbois's study allows historians better access to understanding how locals participated in the genocide literally occurring on their

²⁴ Father Patrick Desbois, *Holocaust by Bullets* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2008).

doorsteps and how it has affected life in Eastern Europe today. The taped testimony sitting in archives like the Shoah Foundation and the Fortunoff Archive offer the same kinds of opportunities for Holocaust historiography in the U.S.

CHAPTER 2 THE HOLOCAUST'S AMERICANIZATION

They don't remember all that history. And they don't, they can't relate to what was going on in other parts of the world because it doesn't connect to them at all.

–Margaret G., Middle School Language Arts Teacher¹

How Did We Arrive Here? The Holocaust's "Americanization"

In middle and high schools across the United States, students' introduction to the Holocaust often occurs through the reading of *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, a short paragraph about the death camps in their history books, and often, depending on where they live and if there is enough time, either a visit from a survivor or a short documentary featuring survivor testimony. Public education about the Holocaust is not limited to the secondary school classroom. Public perception of the Holocaust has also been affected by popular films, documentaries, and novels. Americans receive a very specific story of the Holocaust- one that emphasizes hope, resilience, pluralism, and the fragility of democracy.² While these are lessons that should be taught to the next generation of active citizens, whether they should be found in the study of the Holocaust is another story. There is a tendency in American society to only tell stories with a positive uplifting ending. Difficult legacies and complex issues are often reduced to simple messages that give people hope about the future. This is a tendency in American culture that affects the way Americans approach most historical events. As Holocaust historian Alvin Rosenfeld notes, American culture has a tendency to "individualize, heroize, moralize, idealize, and universalize."³ Dwelling on the dark side

¹ This epigraph was drawn from an interview with Margaret B. (middle school language arts teacher)by the author, November 10, 2011.

² Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: A Mariner Book, Houghton Mifflin Company), 2000), 13. Marcia Sachs Littell, "Reflections of a Holocaust Educator," in *Working to Make a Difference*, ed. Samuel Totten (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), 56.

³ Alvin Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* (Indiana: Indiana University, 2011), Kindle Edition.

of history is not something well tolerated in American culture, stories are often told to emphasize the “saving power of individual moral conduct.”⁴ These ideas have given shape to the memory of the Holocaust in the U.S and it is difficult to break them down. Michael Berenbaum, the first director of the USHMM, argues that these lessons are a necessary part of the public memory in the U.S. For him, the historical experience of the Holocaust- “suffering so great that it threatens to devour human meaning”- cannot set the agenda for commemoration.⁵ How can American culture and institutions commemorate the Holocaust in a way that only undermines their shared values? For Berenbaum, only by allowing the Holocaust to become “Americanized”, or what he calls “nativized”, can it truly reach the general public and policy makers alike on an emotional level.⁶ This idea is born out in the USHMM through the way it commemorates the Holocaust. The museum takes the stance that all victims of the Holocaust should be memorialized, a term some have criticized as being too “universal”. Berenbaum and the museum’s founding commission worked to ensure that this did not “de-Judaize” the Holocaust, but that it was more inclusive.⁷ Acknowledging all of the different victims of the Holocaust allows more Americans to make a connection to the event. When visitors walk through the museum, they will encounter the story of not just Jewish victims, but also Roma and Sinti, Polish political prisoners, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and homosexuals.

The Holocaust’s public profile has grown through film, book, and museum, and scholars have begun to look more critically at the lessons that have become attached to

⁴ Ibid., Kindle Edition.

⁵ Michael Berenbaum, *After Tragedy and Triumph: Essays in Modern Jewish Thought and the American Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 34-35.

⁶ Ibid., 8-10.

⁷ Michael Berenbaum, Introduction to *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Memorial Museum Second Edition* (Washington DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2006), xx.

it in American popular memory. Tracing the Holocaust's post-war life demonstrates how the popular and scholarly understanding of the Holocaust came to stand so far apart. Academics do not agree about how the Holocaust should be represented, or even whether it can be, but many take issue with the simplified and distorted messages now prevalent in its memory. The problems with Holocaust memory have been identified by scholars across academic disciplines – history, literature, film, education – and can be seen in each of their fields. With each new blockbuster film, *New York Times* bestselling novel and museum groundbreaking, awareness of the Holocaust grew, but instead of illuminating the impossibly complex issues inherent in the Holocaust all of this attention has served to simplify it. Rosenfeld has gone so far as to say that if the Holocaust continues to maintain such a prominent place in popular culture it will be the “end of the Holocaust” itself.⁸ He argues that the public memory of the Holocaust has become so divorced from its historical reality that all meaning has been lost. Many argue that the Holocaust's current forms do not create historical, and some would argue moral, understanding of the event. Berenbaum wrestled with these ideas as he sought to create a memorial to the Holocaust to which Americans could relate. Berenbaum notes that,

for the Holocaust to have any sustained impact, it must enter the mainstream of international consciousness as a symbolic word denoting a particular, extraordinary event with moral, political and social implications. Yet the moment it enters the mainstream, the Holocaust becomes fair game for writers, novelists, historians, theologians, and philosophers with different backgrounds and unequal skills.⁹

⁸ Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust*, Kindle Edition.

⁹ Michael Berenbaum, *After Tragedy and Triumph: Essays in Modern Jewish Thought and the American Experience*, 23.

Berenbaum realizes the complex relationship between making the memory of the Holocaust relevant to Americans in such a way that it will encourage reflection and the abuses this will open that memory up to. Without the recognition of the importance of the Holocaust by the diverse American public, it would not be widely remembered. He resists the impulse to create a sense of meaning out of the Holocaust, but realizes that such things will occur if it is to have an impact on people.

The Holocaust has become so pervasive a topic in American life that few adults do not know something about it. Comparing the lessons found in popular culture with deep analysis of first person accounts of the Holocaust highlights the vast gulf separating popular and scholarly understanding of the Holocaust. Many scholars have examined the Holocaust's profile in the U.S., why it looks as it does, and how this differs from how the Holocaust is understood in academic circles. Holocaust memory has been shaped by politics, film, and novel, and has become an important element in education. Understanding how these forces forged current Holocaust memory underscores how the Holocaust came to be seen as an appropriate tool to teach about tolerance, hope, and resiliency. The separation between survivor/academic and popular memory of the Holocaust is wide. The difference lies in the close critical examination of material that leads to nuanced and complicated understandings of the Holocaust and the impulse in American culture to package things for mass consumption. Scholars have examined how the Holocaust has been used in politics, in film, and in education.

“Americanization” of the Holocaust

The Political Post-War Life of the Holocaust

Politics and politicians have played a role in creating the memory of the Holocaust in the U.S. Many scholars claim Holocaust memory has been

“Americanized”, a term meant to underscore how it became a part of the American story- packaged, simplified, and reduced to sound-bytes. Criticisms of the Holocaust’s politicization demonstrate not only how important the Holocaust has become in American life, but also why its current form is problematic. The history of Holocaust education in the U.S. is closely related to how the Holocaust has come to be what scholars have termed “Americanized.” Historians note that the American penchant for looking for redemption has seeped into how the Holocaust has been interpreted. The Holocaust has come to be represented through politics and Hollywood in America – used to support or object to foreign policies, garner support for the state of Israel, encourage tolerance, celebrate American pluralism and promote resilience. Scholars like Langer and Rosenfeld agree that this process has caused the Holocaust to become obscured or distorted to deliver a message of hope. Little consensus exists as to what meaning can be found in the Holocaust, but scholars agree that there is something deeper than what is presented now.

In her book *One, By One, By One*, Judith Miller writes about the use of the memory of the Holocaust in several different countries, including the US. She notes Jimmy Carter’s bid to gain Jewish votes by creating a Holocaust commission and Ronald Reagan’s gaffe at an SS cemetery in Bitburg, Germany, as well as the growing opposition throughout the 1980s of the Holocaust’s Americanization. By tracing how the memory of the Holocaust was used for political reasons, Miller is able to show how malleable a symbol the Holocaust had become and how little understood it truly was. Reagan showed that he understood a tragedy had occurred but not how or why it had happened. When President Reagan visited SS graves in Germany and claimed their

victimhood at the hands of the Nazi system, it became apparent that while people knew the Holocaust happened, little understanding of the event existed.

It was in the 1990s that the Holocaust became most popular with the release of Schindler's List and the opening of the USHMM on the National Mall. James Young outlines the complex nature of politics within the Jewish community itself that often leads to different kinds of memorials in different places. Writing before the USHMM opened, Young could only surmise how the Holocaust will be presented in the nation's capital. He notes in the chapter titled "Plural Faces of Holocaust Memory in America" in his book *The Texture of Memory* that the American conception of the Holocaust places it firmly in the realm of pluralism and American ideals at their best. An event that happened far from America's shores has become one of the most important tools for teaching tolerance and extolling the virtues of pluralism in America. James Young argues that the museum was created not just to tell the story of the Holocaust and the new Americans who arrived on our shores in the wake of World War II, but that it also "would reinforce America's self-idealization as a haven for the world's oppressed" as a way to "represent the Holocaust according to the nation's own ideals, its pluralist tenets."¹⁰ Young's larger argument throughout his book is that national cultures and politics shape how different countries remember the Holocaust, and his description of America's memory of the Holocaust highlights the emphasis on American ideals. How could an event that happened worlds removed from America become so important in this nation's history? For Young, it is because the Holocaust allowed Americans to express how different American society was and is from its European counterpart.

¹⁰ James Young, *The Texture of Memory* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 336.

Using the memory of the Holocaust, policymakers could promote American values of tolerance and pluralism.

The most prominent display of the Holocaust and its permanence in American discourse is the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on the National Mall in Washington, DC. Michael Berenbaum, the museum's first director, notes the museum's purpose is not first to preserve the objects in its collections, but to "educate a new generation, partly in the hope of transforming the future by sensitizing those who will shape it."¹¹ He demonstrates how the Holocaust has become a central part of educating Americans in how to be good democratic citizens. The education room at the USHMM allows visitors a chance to learn about more contemporaneous instances of genocide and to leave a message on a computer message board about how they will work to affect change in their world.

Writing five years after the museum opened, Peter Novick argues in his book *The Holocaust in American Life* that the post-war life of the Holocaust relies on politics. One of the many problems with the memory of the Holocaust for him is that it creates difficulties in grappling with very real problems in American history. It is not so much that the Holocaust has become unrecognizable as such, but that it allows Americans a "shirking of responsibilities that do belong to [sic] them" It becomes easy to shrug off or forget entirely the history of Native Americans, the Jim Crow South, or Japanese internment camps as reflections of the failures of the American system when faced with the horror of the Holocaust.¹² Novick points out a real problem with the way the Holocaust is understood in America. The Holocaust lies so far outside the normal

¹¹ Berenbaum, *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, xix.

¹² Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 15.

democratic experience of most Americans, that its ability to act as a measure of the tragic effects of many events in this country's history is suspect. Drawing parallels between intolerance in current American society and the situation of people living under Nazi occupation causes problems for understanding how and why the Holocaust could have happened.

A Hollywood Ending

At the same time the Holocaust was becoming more politically expedient, it also gained cache in Hollywood. Films like *Schindler's List* and *The Diary of Anne Frank* offer a stylized look at the Holocaust, and are the films that introduce the Holocaust to most Americans. They are many people's only exposure to it. With so much public attention, it is only natural that both receive wide academic criticism.

One of the most popular texts used for teaching the Holocaust *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* presents problems as a source for learning about the Holocaust, especially if it might be the only place someone engages with ideas about genocide, political violence and mass indifference. Anne's diary was turned into a play and film in the 1950s, and has been used in classrooms across America since then. Through her diary, Anne's story has become one of hope overcoming despair as evidenced by her oft quoted "I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart." Her famous diary continues to be read in schools across the country in both its book and play form. Students will then often watch the 1959 film version of her diary. All three show this one young woman's experience of hiding from the Nazis, but none of them paint a picture of the Holocaust as it was experienced by the millions of people murdered in it. Lawrence Langer points out that Anne's diary, while a beautifully written testament of a young girl, can only show us what cannot be learned about the

Holocaust instead of what can be.¹³ By reading the diary, readers are not made aware of almost any important historical dates, the names of death camps, the gas chambers and shooting pits, the death by torture and starvation of millions of people across Europe. The diary's depiction of the Holocaust makes it palatable for school children, but it does not help them gain any kind of understanding of what actually took place under the Nazis' reign. Her story ends before her arrest, deportation, humiliation, separation from her family, and horribly painful death from starvation, cold, and typhus at Bergen-Belsen just before American troops arrived.

Comparing her diary to the fragments left behind by children caught in the net of ghettos and camps long before Anne had to experience them shows just how rare Anne's view is.¹⁴ She did not experience the extreme circumstances facing millions of her contemporaries until much later than many of them, and ending her story before her arrest and then using it as a metonym for the children of Europe during the Holocaust can create an inaccurate understanding of events of the Holocaust. Few teachers touch on the terrible last months of Anne's life in concentration camps. An account of a woman who knew the Anne in Bergen-Belsen tells of Anne's death:

The Frank girls were so emaciated. They looked terrible... You could really see both of them dying, as well as others... Suddenly, I didn't see them anymore, so I had to assume that they had died...At the time, I assumed that the bodies of the Frank girls had also been put down. A huge hole would be dug, and they were thrown into it. That I'm sure of. That must have been their fate, because that's what happened with other people.¹⁵

¹³ Langer, *Using and Abusing the Holocaust*, 20.

¹⁴ Alvin Rosenfeld, "Popularization and Memory: The Case of Anne Frank" in *Lessons and Legacies: The Meaning of the Holocaust in a Changing World* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991).

¹⁵ Langer, *Using and Abusing of the Holocaust*, 26.

Examining how Anne died- starved, humiliated, tortured- shows the horrible reality of the Holocaust for all of those who went through it. Ignoring her tragic end, as done in the play and film, creates a false opportunity to build a hopeful story out of her life and death. In contrast to Anne's diary, reading the words of children caught in the worst of the Nazi inferno earlier than Anne offers insight into the experiences of the vast majority of Jewish children during the war. Twelve year old Judith Wischnjatskaja writing to her father on July 31, 1942 most likely represents a more common view of what was happening to Jews across Europe. Quoted in Berlin's Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe in a letter to her father, Judith writes:

Dear Father! I am saying goodbye to you before I die. We would so love to live but they won't let us and we will die. I am so scared of this death, because the small children are thrown alive into the pit. Goodbye forever.
I kiss you tenderly.
Yours, J

Judith's knowledge of her death and her fear at its horror come through in this letter to her father, also likely murdered by the Nazis during the Second World War. Judith's letter, and others like it, show the more common experience of those who lived through and died in the Holocaust. The American experience is one of pluralism and democracy. At its best, America celebrates the successes of different kinds of people. An American presentation of the Holocaust often relies on the idea of pluralism- from the film version of Anne Frank that plays down her Jewishness to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's emphasis on acceptance- and misunderstandings can occur.

In 1979, NBC aired the mini-series *Holocaust*, and millions of Americans watched. Focused on a family of middle class American Jews, the show was created to allow Americans to identify with the protagonists. It would be difficult for Americans to relate to

a family of Orthodox Jews living in the *shtetls* of Eastern Europe. *Holocaust* was an incredibly popular event that introduced millions of people to the story of Jewish people living in Europe during World War II.¹⁶ That same year, Jimmy Carter created the United States Holocaust Commission charged with creating a suitable memorial to the Holocaust in the US.

Probably the most famous Holocaust film, *Schindler's List*, presents the Holocaust from the point of view of the "good German" who rescues 1,000 Jews from the clutches of the death camps. Both the idea of the "good German" and the experience of Jewish survival were uncommon experiences during the war. Very few Germans helped and most Jews were murdered in horrific ways. Not only does this allow American audiences an opportunity to find hope in the Holocaust by giving people a feel good story to hold onto,¹⁷ but can also either desensitize people to violence or not bring them far enough in their understanding of the horror of the Holocaust.¹⁸ Some scholars argue that the violence he depicts will either simply desensitize people or not bring them far enough in their understanding of the horror of the Holocaust.¹⁹ Spielberg's film reflects the trends in American views of the Holocaust. For many people, especially those who do not get Holocaust education in school, the film is their only encounter with the Holocaust. More attention needs to be paid to how people are exposed to the Holocaust and what lessons they are "learning" from it. Popular representations of the Holocaust

¹⁶ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 209-211.

¹⁷ Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust*, Kindle Edition.

¹⁸ Yosefa Loshnitsky, "Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* versus Lanzmann's *Shoah*," in *Spielberg's Holocaust: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Yosefa Loshnitsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

tend to posit easy to understand lessons. These ideas are embedded in the larger culture and are difficult to break down.

Politics and popular culture reinforced the importance of the Holocaust in American life. As the Holocaust became more important politically, it grew in popular consciousness. Carter created the Commission on the Holocaust the same year the miniseries *Holocaust* debuted, *Schindler's List* premiered as the USHMM opened its doors on the National Mall. Politicians, educators and entertainers hoped to influence the public to become civically engaged and to care about violence against their fellow man. How effective had they been up to this point? As audiences cried through *Schindler's List* and the public began to visit the newly opened national Holocaust museum, war raged in the Balkans, leaving thousands dead from ethnic cleansing. Can it be said that building a Holocaust memorial museum on the National Mall helped American citizens and policy makers learn their "lesson" about ethnic violence? Or has its creation and presentation simply lifted a burden of acknowledging American responsibilities?

CHAPTER 3 MEMORIALIZATION

Let's face it. Museums, archives, tapes, whatever can be destroyed... You know, the spoken word passed on can live.

–Ewa C., Auschwitz survivor¹

It is not a story. It has to be made a story. In order to convey it. And with all the frustration that implies. Because, at best, you compromise. You compromise.

–Leon H., *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors*²

In study after study, interview after interview, Holocaust survivors attest to the importance of bearing witness to the horror that befell them and those who did not return from the Nazi inferno. During the war itself, many felt compelled to record their experiences in personal diaries and letters as well as organized efforts like the Oyneg Shabbat archive in the Warsaw Ghetto. Many of these documents survived the war to give voice to their authors who did not live. The compulsion to record and to remember drove them to write down what happened around them even though it often meant risking death if caught. A similar need drove many of the men, women, and children who survived the war and felt a deep need to tell the stories of the dead to the next generation. Their need to tell the story, to impact the future, overcame the pain inherent in dredging up memories of the war and their dead loved ones. It is not easy for survivors to convey their experiences. How does one speak of mass murder? Starvation? Torture? Charlotte Delbo writes of having to readjust to the outside world's definition of words. "I'm thirsty. Let's make a cup of tea.' 'Thirst' has once more become a currently used term. On the other hand, if I dream of the thirst that I felt in Auschwitz-

¹ This epigraph is drawn from an interview with Ewa C. (Holocaust survivor) by the author, November 8, 2011.

² This epigraph is drawn from Henry Greenspan's *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors*.

Birkenau, I see myself as I was then. But if you want me to speak about it..."³ The words of the world outside Auschwitz available to survivors can never express the magnitude of the tragedy of genocide. But the compulsion to pass on their memories drives many to continue speaking of their experiences despite the lack of words. The quotes above describe the two competing impulses within survivors- the need to tell their tale so others will hear and remember and the inefficacy of language to allow the listener to make the leap back in time and place to the Holocaust. Survivors must find a way to craft their stories into a narrative that the public can begin to comprehend.

Those who lived through the Holocaust have become embodiments of the lessons of the Holocaust. Survivors have become symbols of strength, resilience, intolerance and coming out of the darkness, and have been the driving force behind efforts to build memorials, monuments, and educational materials. Holocaust memory turns on the survivor. Today, living survivors remain involved in these efforts, but one day soon they will be gone. Their voices live on in what has become the largest collection of oral testimony gathered from one event. Long after the last survivor has died, their recorded testimony will remain. The nature of oral history presents a unique opportunity for scholars and educators to engage with the memory of the Holocaust. Psychology, history, literature, and other theories can help identify the themes and motifs found in these tapes. Some of this work has already been done and the results contradict the popular memory of the Holocaust. Further study of the videotapes and increased integration of the findings into the public education system- both in schools and museums- can help reshape Holocaust memory into something that requires people to delve deeply into the issues and ask questions.

³ Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 14.

Survivor testimony, captured, catalogued, and increasingly made available online, provides a unique opportunity for engagement with history. Seeing the emotion in someone's eyes, listening for the pauses in speech, hearing the struggle for words, and processing the magnitude of the tragedy of the Holocaust on an individual level creates a different understanding of the Holocaust than the reading of documents can provide. Testimony has the power to touch the unengaged student, and the passive museum visitor in a way simple text cannot. Because of oral testimony's power, its use is becoming more widespread, and close examination and analysis of how it is used is necessary. The vast number of testimonies will defy easy quantification and qualification- but maybe that is the point. The Holocaust cannot be reduced to sound-bytes and easy lessons. It requires continued re-examination, and its study should raise more questions than it answers.

In the initial years after the war, survivors in the U.S. were encouraged by their family and friends to embrace their new lives and to put their past behind them.⁴ But, fifty years later, the survivor had become an important symbol in American culture. Their stories were coveted, tracked down, taped, archived and used in classrooms and museums across the country. Tens of thousands of interviews with Holocaust survivors, bystanders and perpetrators now exist in dozens of languages ready for analysis, interpretation and use in educational material. They are often used today in documentaries, museum theaters, and classroom lesson plans. The stories are difficult to tell and difficult to listen to, but those who tell them wish to be heard and those who

⁴ Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 34.

listen will be forever changed. These oral histories present a way for scholars to examine the Holocaust anew and form a new public memory of the Holocaust.

Collaboration between the historian and his subject is an integral part of successful oral history projects. Scholars can better uncover the meaning of an event for an individual or a group of people by successfully working with their subject to create an oral document. Working with someone through the process of constructing their life story, uncovering how they edit and tell their own story can help both the researcher and subject create a rich historical document.⁵ Working together in the initial stages of the interview process is important in creating an environment where the subject feels comfortable enough to delve into their memories, but the idea of collaboration, care and trust carries through the entire project. Oral historians and educators must dedicate the same care to their study and use of the testimonies they collect.

Oral historians Michael Frisch and Valerie Yow caution those who undertake oral history projects to carefully consider the power relationships inherent in an interview situation. Writing in the 1980s, Frisch argues that for oral history to be effectual, the historian must be willing to “share authority” with his subject in order to create a clearer more honest accounting of the past. For Frisch, it is important that scholars take note of the thoughts of their subjects. Finding a balance between an oral historian’s responsibility to history and to his subjects has the potential to generate more nuanced historical accounts. Scholars cannot simply impose their own meaning on someone else’s life story. Careful consideration must be taken in analysis and editing. Yow notes that in recent years, a shift has occurred making the relationship between interviewer and subject flatter. The power relationship of scholar over subject obvious to previous

⁵ Young, *Writing and Rewriting History*, 161.

generations of historians began to change as historians began to acknowledge that their subjects were intelligent human beings and not just sources of information. What these two point out is not just the problems inherent in the collection process of oral history, but also the considerations of how it can and should be used. It is not enough to gather testimony on a tape; it must be listened to and analyzed for its true meaning. Frisch notes that good editing of an interview can create a more cogent and honest piece of work for public consumption, but underscores how important it is that those editing the document remain true to its original message.

The Collection of Oral Testimony

There has been a huge push to collect the oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors on video, especially since the mid-1990s and the creation of Steven Spielberg's University of Southern California Shoah Foundation. The sheer number of testimonies available creates an opportunity for both study and teaching. Little work has been done on how these taped testimonies are being used now or what they can be used for. Teachers invite survivors into their classrooms to create connections with students, but in the future, all will have to rely on these tapes to create a similar emotional effect. Museums use taped testimony too. Today, the USHMM closes with a small theater that allows visitors to hear personal stories about the history they just learned about in an attempt to create the same effect. These testimonies give people an entrance into the human impact of genocide and they can hold people's attention and potentially give them pause to think about their preconceived notions of what the Holocaust means for our world today.

As those who lived through the Nazi inferno age and die, their tens of thousands of taped interviews will become even more important for research and presentation of the

Holocaust. The large number of testimonies sitting in archives presents an opportunity for researchers to study the collection for what it means for history, sociology and psychology, and how it should be used. Very little of this work has been done, and because of this, misrepresentations will, and indeed already have, become possible. Scholars and educators have a responsibility to the survivors who share their painful memories to try to understand those stories and to ensure others gain insight into what they are saying about this history and their lives. As access to digitized archival material continues to grow and Holocaust education becomes more important (politically and socially), historians must begin to look more carefully at Holocaust oral testimony carefully to determine its best uses in museums and classrooms.

Two archives important in the collection and dissemination of testimony are the Shoah Foundation and the Yale Fortunoff Archive, but they are not the only two. A few of the other organizations that house large collections are: the USHMM, the University of Michigan-Dearborn, and the Holocaust Documentation and Education Center in Hollywood, Florida. This list is not exhaustive and does not include smaller museums nor schools or local history organizations that have undertaken their own drives to collect testimony. The drive exists to collect these testimonies, but the question remains to what end? Looking at the two most influential archives, the Shoah Foundation being the largest and the Fortunoff Archive the oldest, sheds light on the scope of the collection and the many ways it can be used.

The Shoah Foundation

Moved by his experience filming *Schindler's List*, Steven Spielberg founded The Survivors of the Shoah Foundation founded in 1994. According the USC Shoah Foundation website, his support has allowed the organization to grow to hold almost

52,000 interviews in 32 languages from 56 countries. In January 2006, the Shoah Foundation officially became part of the Dana and David Dornsife College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences at the University of Southern California. The Foundation's name changed when care of the collection was officially transferred to USC. Its new name, the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education reflected the organization's broadened mission from simply collecting testimony to working to overcome prejudice, intolerance and bigotry through the educational use of testimony. To this end, the Shoah Foundation has worked to make its collection increasingly available and has expanded the scope of its interviews.

Today, the Shoah Foundation no longer interviews survivors of the Holocaust, but is actively training new volunteers to travel to places like Cambodia and Rwanda to gather the testimonies of the people who survived those countries' genocide. Interviews by the Shoah Foundation are structured chronologically, beginning with pre-war life and ending with the survivors' life after the war. At the end of the interview, survivors are asked to invite their families on camera to talk about how they have rebuilt their lives in the wake of the Holocaust. This structuring reflects the Americanized ideal of the Holocaust- one of a survivor overcoming the odds to build a new and happy life. The Shoah Foundation has put great effort into making clips these testimonies available to the public for use in education.

Steven Spielberg and the Shoah Foundation have committed themselves to making these testimonies available for educational purposes in classrooms and museums. They have linked with four museums and libraries in the US and Yad

Vashem in Israel to make the entire collection of testimony more widely available.⁶ They have also created programs like iWitness and documentaries like the award winning *The Last Days*. These efforts simultaneously work to strengthen the public memory of the Holocaust and to undermine it. As more scholars gain access to the collection of testimony, more efforts like Langer's, Greenspan's, and Kraft's can be undertaken and this can be used to counter the messages found in more popular works. The Yale Fortunoff Archive has been used in many important studies on oral testimony and Holocaust memory. The case studies cited above were all done from testimonies taken at Yale. The Fortunoff Archive has worked diligently to make its collection available to scholars from different fields for study.

The Yale Fortunoff Archive

In contrast to the Shoah Foundation, the Fortunoff Archive uses an open-ended free flowing, non-interventionist method of interviewing. From the very outset, survivors are given control over the interview. The interviewee introduces himself on the tape and begins his free recall of events of the Holocaust. The interviewer is there to prompt the person to start, perhaps by asking about pre-war life, and then to ask clarifying questions only. Often survivors can speak uninterrupted for 30-40 minutes. Henry Greenspan points out that the philosophy of the Fortunoff Archive is that the giving of testimony is to "remember for the purpose of remembering."⁷ Survivors are encouraged to follow the trajectory of their own thoughts while recalling. The Yale Fortunoff Archive has been used in many important studies on oral testimony and Holocaust memory. The case studies cited above were all done from testimonies taken at Yale. The Fortunoff

⁶ Mark Goldman, "An Interview with Michael Berenbaum: The Holocaust and Education," in *Phi Delta Kappan*, 79, 4 (1997): 317.

⁷ Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History*, xviii.

Archive has worked diligently to make its collection available to scholars from different fields of study.

While the Shoah Foundation has the resources to travel the world collecting and archiving tens of thousands of interviews, the Yale Fortunoff Archive notes on its website that it houses a much smaller collection of testimony. The Fortunoff Archive holds over 4,400 testimonies of Holocaust survivors and witnesses. The project began in 1979 when television specialist Laurel Vlock and survivor psychologist Dori Laub came together over the premise that the medium of video could successfully document personal memories of the Holocaust. Their meeting was so fruitful that they decided to expand their project to interview more survivors. Literature professor Geoffrey Hartman was called on to head the project, and the grassroots organization the Holocaust Survivors Film Project began. Laub, Vlock, and Hartman began working at a time when the Holocaust was just beginning to become a part of American consciousness on a large scale, and they were innovators in using the video tape to record testimony. Within two years, they had collected 200 interviews and deposited them at Yale. Like the Shoah Foundation, the Fortunoff Archive works to record, catalog, and disseminate its interviews to the public for research and educational purposes. The Fortunoff Archive has sponsored many conferences on the use of oral testimony in education, supports academic research and works with organizations like Facing History And Ourselves and Life Unworthy of Life.

Holocaust Memory in the Public Sphere

The problem of appropriating the Holocaust to teach “lessons” of the Holocaust exists in the wider national culture. People learn about the Holocaust inside and outside the classroom. Museum curators, seminar planners and film makers must find ways to

present the incredibly heavy history of the Holocaust in a way that people will respond to. The growth of museums, monuments, awareness days, film screenings, and best-selling novels points to a growing awareness of the Holocaust, but not necessarily a growing historical understanding among the public. Just as scholars and educators should carefully examine their goals when teaching the Holocaust, so too should those writing legislation and curating exhibits. Holocaust monuments and museums have become popular throughout the country and they present unique challenges for those creating and running them. Curators caring for exhibits on the Holocaust, or any kind of traumatic experience for that matter, must contend with issues of how graphic the exhibit can be, how to balance the reality of the event with what viewers are prepared to see and hear. They must write a narrative that is both informative and appropriate for its audiences. The question many ask- can we learn anything from the Holocaust and if not, why should we remember it?- drives the creation of museums and memorials throughout the country. This question has compelled historians, educators, and policy makers to search for a redeemable meaning in the Holocaust to pass down to future generations.

An interesting approach to museums devoted to traumatic memory has been the creation of what have come to be called memorial museums. Unlike traditional museums, memorial museums focus not on the care and exhibit of objects, but on instructing future generations “to learn its lessons and use its memory to strengthen democracy and prevent future violence.”⁸ Ideas like this guide the USHMM in its selection of exhibits, lectures, and outreach. Educating the public about the Holocaust

⁸ Amy Sodaro, “Politics of the Past: Remembering the Rwandan Genocide at the Kigali Memorial Center,” in *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Pasts in Public Places*, ed. Erica Lehrer, Cynthia E. Milton, and Monica Eileen Patterson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 73.

becomes a way to encourage them to stand for their democratic traditions. The USHMM is the largest Holocaust museum in the country and its influence reflects that. Since it opened in 1993, over 30 million people have visited the museum, seen its exhibits, attended workshops and teaching seminars.⁹ The USHMM plays a large role in shaping the current shape of Holocaust memory. Its political messages about democracy and plurality form the basis of how the people who visit the museum understand the Holocaust. Their exhibits, photographs, dioramas, memorial space and even use of oral testimony at the end come together to support the goal of affecting people so that they leave feeling like they must take action against injustice wherever they see it. The last exhibit visitors see is the oral testimony theater, where they are invited to listen to clips of emotionally moving testimony, and then, the education room asks the visitor to reflect on what they can do in their own lives to prevent future genocides.

The problems inherent in curating an exhibit about traumatic history and the desire to teach the public lessons about what that difficult event means for the future direct how all elements of the exhibit will work together. The oral testimony at the end of the main exhibit *The Holocaust* at the USHMM draws visitors in to contemplate what they have just learned about the Holocaust and what it means for American society. The testimonies, edited into short comprehensible stories juxtaposed with the larger exhibit reinforce the mission of the museum to encourage visitors to reflect on their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy.¹⁰ The American experience of the Holocaust was that of a bystander. Today, Americans stand by as atrocities continue to occur

⁹ Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust*, Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ "Mission Statement," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, last modified February 25, 2012. www.ushmm.org/museum/mission.

around the world. The museum asks visitors to think about this as they wind their way back to the nation's capitol.

An example of collaborative use of and careful examination of oral testimony is the exhibit *"We were so far away": The Inuit Experience of Residential Schools* that traveled throughout Canada documenting the lives of Inuit children forced from their ancestral homes into European boarding schools. Heather Iglorliorte and other curators worked with their Inuit subjects from the inception of the project through its completion. The participants were given control and final say in what segments of their interviews would be used in the final exhibit.¹¹ They were thus allowed to attach their own importance and find their own meaning in the interviews. It was not externally imposed. The curators of the Inuit exhibit incorporated oral history theory to ensure that they did not rob the participants of their voice by creating their own narrative out of the participants' words. Holocaust museums and educational organizations can use examples like this to create materials that reflect what survivors are saying in their testimonies. The narrative the exhibit created reflected the narrative the Inuit participants were trying to tell. By collaborating with their participants and really listening to their stories, the curators of *"We Were So Far Away"* created an exhibit that gave an honest portrayal of the lives of their subjects. The methods of oral history offer opportunities for scholars to collaborate with their subjects to create nuanced, thoughtful, sometimes counter-narratives to the public discourse.

The tens of thousands of survivor testimonies present documentary filmmakers, educators, and museum curators with opportunities to craft meaningful and thought-

¹¹ Heather Iglorliorte, "We were so far away": Exhibiting Inuit Oral Histories of Residential Schools," in *Curating Difficult Knowledge*, ed. Erica Lehrer, Cynthia E. Milton, and Monica Eileen Patterson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 34.

provoking vignettes about the Holocaust, but they also have the potential to lead to short, digestible and cliché filled ones. Those who create these programs must have a firm grounding in the historical background of the Holocaust, as well as the theories and practice of oral history, so they can convey the depth and magnitude of the experiences expressed.¹² Oral testimonies can be seen as a real source of information, and not simply as vehicles for eliciting emotion from viewers. As Lawrence Langer points out, these “narratives are no substitute for the broader information that documents provide; but their intimacy with the murdered, if not with the murders, extends the range of our hearing about the Holocaust to include the voices, often literally, of those whom their persecutors had hoped to silence forever.”¹³ Langer speaks of the importance of oral testimony for approaching the Holocaust, but also addresses the need for a broad historical background on which people can place the testimony. Without a firm grounding in the historical facts of the Holocaust, any kind of understanding of its significance will be impossible to comprehend. The way oral testimony is currently being used for public education does not support engagement with Holocaust history, but often uses testimony to support simplified lessons about democracy, resilience, and what it means to be a survivor. Oral history offers a unique window into the past, one that cannot be found by those who carried out the Holocaust, and one that can help inform how the Holocaust should be remembered.

¹² Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (New York: State University of New York, 1990), 60-62.

¹³ Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, 103.

CHAPTER 4 ORAL HISTORY IN EDUCATION

The basic message is about hatred and prejudice and as you know, now in school stress is put on bullying.

–Lisl B., Thereisenstadt survivor¹

Now I understand the Holocaust better. It's just like what goes on in my high school.

–High School Sophomore²

Holocaust Memory inside the Classroom

In the 1970s, as a general consciousness of the Holocaust arose, teachers began looking at their curriculum and realized the Holocaust – an incredibly traumatic and extraordinarily violent episode – was missing from their curriculum. Several teachers began to look for ways to teach the Holocaust, an incredibly complex moral and historical event, to the students sitting unengaged in their classrooms.³ Leading educators began to tackle the big questions surrounding the Holocaust – its uniqueness, its place in American history, its representability, its lessons for future generations – and started creating some of the most popular curriculum available or simply adding the topic to their classroom lesson plans. As teachers began to implement Holocaust education experimentally in their classrooms, consciousness of it grew in the general public as well.

By the 1980s, after the miniseries *Holocaust* brought the mass murder of Jews to public consciousness, survivors began to be invited into classrooms where they lived, especially South Florida, New York and Southern California, and professors at Yale had

¹ This epigraph is drawn from an interview with Lisl B. (Holocaust survivor) by author, December 11, 2011.

² This epigraph is drawn from a student speaking at the Hollywood Holocaust Documentation and Education Center's Student Awareness Day on November 15, 2011.

³ Thomas Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 182.

begun to record survivor testimony. Today, if a school can afford the cost, they can fly a survivor and their liaison from the USHMM in Washington, DC to meet with their students anywhere in the country. Survivor testimony- from a live person or a taped interview- has become important in how the Holocaust is told. Scholars, educators and policy makers began to see that survivors' tears, laughter, pain and memories touched people in a way that other materials could not. Survivors have been asked to share their stories with students at schools or the public in special events at museums, and have also been asked to record their testimony for future use. With different audiences and different purposes, the stories survivors are willing and able to tell can vary widely. Whether a live thirty minute interview with a class or a six hour interview for archival purposes, when used for educational purposes, their testimony has been shaped by the public memory of the Holocaust. Prolonged and in-depth study from various academic disciplines of the testimonies available can be used to address how the Holocaust is remembered in the U.S. and can offer a new more nuanced approach to remembering such a traumatic event.

Secondary schools remain the most effective place to teach factually sound history that will reach the largest amount of people. While only some people may visit a museum, watch a film, or read a book- everyone must sit in a classroom. Bridging the gap between academia and the public is important in creating a new understanding of the Holocaust. Acknowledging that the Holocaust has become important in American consciousness through its popularization, educator Thomas Fallace disagrees with those who say the Holocaust has no place in an American classroom. His point is well taken. The Holocaust has permeated American consciousness to a degree that few

other events outside the American experience have. Paying attention to how the Holocaust is presented in classrooms and museums, on film, and TV and offering a more critical approach will help alleviate the issue of appropriating the Holocaust for different uses. The memory of the Holocaust is now an American memory. There is still time to define what that memory will be in the future. Fallace argues that historians can no longer simply decry the state of Holocaust education, but must work with the system to create a more nuanced approach to teaching about the Holocaust. As it stands today, Holocaust education, the museums, lesson plans and their use of oral testimony all reflect the public memory of the Holocaust. The collection of oral testimony that exists offers scholars the opportunity to address some of the problems with the public memory of the Holocaust and to propose a more nuanced and thoughtful one.

The Holocaust has come to represent man's ultimate evil and stands as a warning about the fragility of democracy. Answering why the Holocaust is taught illustrates why the public memory of the Holocaust stands as it does. The federal government, state governments, and individual teachers feel the Holocaust offers important civics lessons for Americans. Drawing lessons about survival, hope, and democracy have led to some of the issues with the Holocaust's simplification. In states where the Holocaust has been mandated like Florida, teachers must find ways to incorporate vague legislation into their tightly packed curriculum. Following California, which passed legislation in 1988, and at the same time as New York, legislators in Florida created a mandate requiring teachers to implement Holocaust education in their classrooms. The vague legislation does not provide teachers with direction about how to incorporate the Holocaust into

their classes, but they are required to find a way to do so, often with little training or knowledge of the event.

Scholars and educators rarely agree on what approaches to take when teaching the Holocaust. Debates about approaches and goals reflect the larger issue of how the Holocaust has come to be remembered in America and demonstrate how little consensus exists as well as how little critical study of what teachers are doing in their classrooms has been done. Lucy Russell, looking at schools in England where the Holocaust has been mandated a part of school curriculum as well, and Simone Scweber, examining four different teachers in California, demonstrate how little clarity there is in the rationale for teaching the Holocaust from the governmental level down to that of the teacher and the problems this raises in places where legislation requires the Holocaust be taught. Russell notes that “a failure to establish the aims and objectives and, therefore, the content and method of history courses” make it impossible for teachers to “characterize their work clearly.”⁴ Without a clearly delineated reason for teaching the Holocaust, teachers are left to create one of their own. Teachers fall back on the public memory of the Holocaust. When museums and education centers are using survivor testimony to support education about democracy, pluralism and anti-bullying, what are classroom teachers supposed to do?

Both Russell and Scweber argue that legislators believe the moral lessons of the Holocaust are apparent to anyone who encounters the subject. Scweber notes that this is not the case and that lessons from the Holocaust are “anything but simple”⁵.

⁴ Lucy Russell, *Teaching the Holocaust in School History: Teachers or Preachers?* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 135.

⁵ Simone Scweber, *Making Sense of the Holocaust: Lessons from Classroom Experience* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2004), 153.

Legislators and educators need to define their goals more clearly. The lack of clarity in educational goals goes back to the lack of consensus over what the Holocaust means. Some see the lessons of the Holocaust as so simple they hardly need explication, others argue that only through intense historical inquiry can any sense be made of the Holocaust⁶, and others contend that a more hopeful present can be found by bearing witness to testamentary evidence.⁷ Schweber's careful study of four California history teachers and their approaches to teaching the Holocaust demonstrate how the same topic in different hands can lead to different learning outcomes for students. One teacher's class, a man she names Mr. Z, left feeling empowered to make decisions about moral behavior, but knew little of the actual facts of the Holocaust. They felt prepared to make a decision about how famed Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal should have treated an SS man he caught, without knowing who the SS were or what Wiesenthal had suffered at their hands. Schweber contends that because the Holocaust defies easy to remember lessons, many people exploit the emotional power of the Holocaust to promote their own goals.⁸ Teachers like Mr. Z do not spend enough time reflecting on what their aims for teaching the Holocaust are, and they often end up creating lesson plans that do not help students gain a greater understanding of the Holocaust as a historical or moral event.

Schweber's work reflects the realities teachers face when dealing with the Holocaust. She asks how to get students to care and understand about an incredibly complex subject that they most likely have been little prepared for themselves. States

⁶ Michael Marrus, "Good History and the Teaching of the Holocaust," in *Lessons and Legacies Volume II: Teaching the Holocaust in a Changing World* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 24.

⁷ Roger I. Simon, *The Touch of the Past* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 112.

⁸ Schweber, *Making Sense of the Holocaust*, 153.

where Holocaust education is mandated leave teachers in the unique position of having to teach about a complex subject they may know or care little about. The dedication many historians of the Holocaust share in ensuring their students leave class with both an understanding of the Holocaust as a historical and moral event may be lacking.

Both Margaret G. and the Student Awareness Day, an event I participated in as part of this study and quoted at the beginning of this chapter, demonstrate how the issue of how simplified messages about the Holocaust in society are reflected in things like Florida's Holocaust mandate that requires educators to incorporate the subject into their classrooms. The Holocaust has come to be seen as a rejoinder against evil, a reminder to uphold democracy, and a warning of the dangers of remaining silent. As Florida's governor, Lawton Chiles, and lieutenant governor, Buddy McKay, note in the State of Florida Resource Manual on Holocaust Education in 1998, the Holocaust "serves as a somber reminder to all of us that when evil is tolerated and not challenged, we pay a catastrophic price." Their words greet those teachers opening the manual looking for historical information and lesson plans setting the tone for the rest of the manual. The emphasis here is not on learning about the Holocaust as an historical event- albeit one that is incredibly difficult to comprehend- but as a warning against loss of democratic virtue.

The Living Survivor's Voice

Educators from middle school through university testify that meeting with a survivor or even just watching the testimony of someone provides an emotional connection for their students in a way films, novels, and historical works cannot. Oral testimonies from survivors are used by teachers as a way to reach students and to provide a human element to a nightmarish history. Teachers can access online

archives, find documentaries that make use of oral testimony, or even invite a survivor into their classroom. Each of these methods provides students with a short, cohesive, and impactful encounter with Holocaust history.

Teachers, both the Holocaust professionals Totten brings together and the classroom teachers interviewed for this project, find that survivor testimony has a profound and lasting effect on students. Interviewed for this project, Susan D., a librarian at an alternative high school, talks about the students in her unit showing up to class on a regular basis to learn about the Holocaust and then sitting in awe of the tiny old woman who came to speak to them of her experiences.⁹ Also interviewed for this project, Julie S., an eighth grade language arts teacher, notes that her students who cannot normally be quiet for two minutes sit silently throughout their meeting with a survivor.¹⁰ These anecdotes demonstrate the emotional power oral testimony has on those who listen to it. Hearing the story of a survivor who lived through the Holocaust reaches many students in a way that reading about the Holocaust in a textbook will not. Such a powerful tool should be used carefully and can be used to get students to think critically about what they have learned.

Just as importantly, many survivors feel compelled to share their stories with future generations whether by visiting classrooms over and over again or by recording their life history with one of the many organizations that undertake such tasks. Knowing what these survivors say in these testimonies and what can actually be taken from them may help inform educators about how best to approach the subject. Taking stories out of context or editing them to end a certain way distorts the core of what these stories

⁹ Susan D. (High school librarian) in interview with author, November 8, 2011.

¹⁰ Julie S. (8th grade teacher) in interview with author, November 10, 2011.

mean, as has been done by the archival organizations that collect and disseminate them. In states like Florida, where legislation exists mandating they teach the Holocaust, teachers must sift through popular curriculum, films and novels, often with little to no guidance or preparation about the complex moral and historical issues of the Holocaust.

In Florida, teachers are required to teach the Holocaust according to a mandate adopted in 1994. Mandate 233.061 states:

Members of the instructional staff of the public schools, subject to the rules and regulations of the commissioner, the state board, and the school board, shall teach efficiently and faithfully, using the books and materials required, following the prescribed courses of study, and employing approved methods of instruction, the following:

The history of the Holocaust (1933-1945), the systematic, planned annihilation of European Jews and other groups by Nazi Germany, a watershed event in the history of humanity, to be taught in a manner that leads to an investigation of human behavior, an understanding of the ramifications of prejudice, racism, and stereotyping, and an examination of what it means to be a responsible and respectful person, for the purposes of encouraging tolerance of diversity in a pluralistic society and for nurturing and protecting democratic values and institutions.

The legislation does not give teachers much direction beyond finding a way to incorporate the Holocaust into their classrooms to teach tolerance. Teachers across curriculum- especially history, literature, social studies, and civics- work to bring the “lessons” of the Holocaust to their students.

The survivors tell their stories before crowds large and small in the hopes of passing on the legacy of the Holocaust. Little can substitute hearing a living person speak and watching the emotion in their eyes. Unfortunately, these valuable resources have been subject to the same forces shaping the presentation of the Holocaust in the US. Survivors often feel compelled, on their own or under pressure from others, to edit

their stories to fit their audience. Lili B. told this story, ending it by noting that she cannot share this with students because she does not want to give them nightmares.

The Germans used to come in and if they grabbed the baby. Unfortunately, living across, I saw. Would take, one would stay with a gun in front of the mother, the one, other one would go upstairs with the baby, throw the baby out of the fourth floor in front of the mother. Then the one down there after she was splattered with the brain and blood of the child, he would kill her then. After watching. And they preferred that place to do it because they were safe. The railing. No matter how he went to throw the baby out, he wasn't gonna take his life in danger. Now after a thing like this, how can I believe?

Me: I don't know.

Binstock: Naturally, I don't tell this to little kids because I don't want them to have nightmares. It's it's how could one human being do this to another human being? For what? Why? Why?

Lili B. was clearly troubled by her memories of this event. It was a regular occurrence in her life while in the Warsaw Ghetto. She felt she could not tell this story to students. It did not fit the needs of the teacher, it did not fit the needs of society, and it would potentially cause students nightmares without giving them anything redeeming to hold on to, as Berenbaum would have. How could a story like this fit in a classroom or museum exhibit? How can the story of the Holocaust be told without including elements of its true horror?

Sitting in the living room of Essia A. and seeing the tears in her eyes as she speaks of her most recent visit to the doctor's that brought back memories of watching her mother and herself be stripped and searched at the gates of Auschwitz,¹¹ or hearing the pain in Julius E.'s voice as he recalls the screams of people in the gas chambers that he could hear every day while in Auschwitz,¹² or watching Lisl B.'s breakdown as

¹¹ Lili B. (Holocaust survivor) in interview with author, November 12, 2011.

¹² Julius E. (Holocaust survivor) in interview with author, November 21, 2011.

she talks of the depth of her entire family that she managed to escape by being pushed off the train underscored the difficulty survivors have in telling their stories and the importance they attach to it.¹³ In the classroom, stories like these, if they even get old, are often used to support an anti-bullying message, tolerance education, and to teach about what it means to be a survivor. The experience remains a painful one each and every time survivors tell their stories in the hopes of reaching future generations so they will remember and never let something like the Holocaust happen again. Each of the six survivors I interviewed for this project had different reasons for sharing their stories with the public, but all said they had felt compelled to do so.

The compulsion to speak and to educate future generations overcomes the pain and the misconceptions survivors face time and again when sharing their stories. Just as a wide space exists between the public and private memory of the Holocaust, it also exists in the public presentations and private musings of survivors themselves. Survivors must tailor their story to their audience, and the story they tell reflects that. When sitting in classrooms speaking with students, survivors must create a narrative that students can not only follow, but one they can grasp intellectually. Each of the six survivors interviewed spoke of how carefully they edit their stories for younger listeners in middle school who do not have a firm background in the Holocaust and who are not old enough to hear about violence. Lisl B. told a story about how she cannot use the word murder when speaking with one teacher's fourth grade class. This begs the question: What is the Holocaust if not a story of murder? And it is a very personal story of murder for Lisl B. Survivors have been placed on a pedestal in the classroom. They are seen as a tool that can bring history alive, but the constraints placed on them by the

¹³ Lisl B. (Holocaust survivor) in interview with author, December 11, 2011.

way the Holocaust is being taught only lead to the further distortion of history. In Florida, the push has been towards an anti-bullying agenda, and the use of survivor testimony reflects this. Each survivor interviewed claimed as one of their main reasons for speaking to students was to ensure that what happened to them did not happen again, often followed by a discussion of the problem with bullying in schools today. No distinction is made, even among survivors themselves, between the Nazi genocide under Hitler and the bullying that occurs in American schools today.

Many survivors are asked into classrooms often. These people and other survivors who are uncomfortable telling their stories to the public will often sit down with trained interviewers from different archives to record their experiences for future study. Innumerable factors shape what survivors will say in their interview: who is doing the interview, how comfortable the survivor feels, how often they tell their story, how the interview is shaped, but despite this, these interviews offer historians invaluable information about how the Holocaust occurred and what it means to those who lived through it. While scholars argue over the merits and pitfalls of the vast collection of oral testimony, the fact of the matter is that it already exists- and it has become central to how the Holocaust is taught and remembered. Tens of thousands of tapes already exist, survivors already visit schools, and something must be done to address how they are being used. Currently, the simple popular memory of the Holocaust shapes their use at the public level even as scholars work through the material to uncover its complexities and argue that survivor testimony should not be used to support this memory.

The Collection's Use in Classrooms

The Survivors of the Shoah Foundation and the Yale Fortunoff Video Archive are the two largest and most influential archives of oral testimony in this country and around

the world. Their approach to the collection and dissemination of material demonstrates how the use of oral testimony has been Americanized, where the debates among historians about its use lie, *and* can be used to create a new memory of the Holocaust. Organizations like the Shoah Foundation and the Yale Fortunoff Archives work to make parts of their collections available online for classroom use. The full testimonies are available for researchers at the archives, but clips from longer interviews are made available online for teachers use. When survivors go into classrooms and tell their stories, they often feel compelled to edit their stories to fit within the constraints placed on them by teachers, the curriculum, and wider social norms. Many of their stories are not fit to tell to middle and high school students. What the living survivor offers that taped testimonies do not, is the power they still maintain to tell their story themselves, and the ability to address misunderstandings that arise. Clips taken from longer testimonies do not offer the same opportunity. They are edited by people at the archives to fit the “lessons” and “messages” that have become attached to the Holocaust and presented online for teachers’ use. In classrooms, the testimonies are being used to further reinforce what has become the popular memory of the Holocaust in the US.

The USC Shoah Foundation and CNN have recently made public their collaboration called iWitness that makes 1,000 clips of testimonies available for secondary school teachers to use in their classrooms. Not only will teachers have access to the clips to integrate into their lessons, iWitness encourages teachers to allow students to work with the testimonies to create their own video presentations for class. Students and teachers can search the clips by topic or by name. The topics were picked by using the most popular search terms used in the Visual History Archive, the topics of

college courses and data collected from teachers by the Institute. The way these short clips (most of which last at most a minute and a half) are being used will only reinforce the major themes in Holocaust memory that exist today. Students will not seriously engage with survivor testimony in any meaningful way by only encountering short clips whose themes are already identified. Not only are the testimonies incredibly short, they have been cut from their wider context. When students hear a survivor speak about their experience with courage, anti-Semitism, faith, fear, or identity, they are not able to hear how those thoughts compare with what the person says in other areas of their testimony.

In addition, the Shoah Foundation, with its 52,000 catalogued interviews in dozens of languages, offers seven easy-to-access thirty minute Living History video clips and accompanying lessons and activities on its website. The men and women in the videos represent people from all aspects of Holocaust history, with stories emphasizing justice, survival, perseverance, and resistance. The interviews, including their titles, are:

- Howard Cwick, liberator, “Eyewitness to History”
- Vera Lusk, political prisoner, “Power of Resistance”
- Julia Lentini, Sinti and Roma, “ Depravity and Perseverance”
- Nechama Shneorsen, Jewish, “Survival and Loss”
- Alfred Steer, war crimes, “Responsibility and Justice”
- Jontje Vos, rescuer, “Choices of Courage”
- Franz Wohl, Jehovah’s Witness, “Standing Firm in Faith”

The titles of each of these clips place an emphasis on positive aspects of the Holocaust and its experience. Little sense of despair, tragedy, or indescribable sadness exists in these titles. Only the lesson backing up Nechama Shneorsen’s video talks about the loss of family and home after the war. In addition, the videos themselves are presented in chronological order as Shoah Foundation interviews were taken, leading

the survivor to end his story with triumph.¹⁴ The videos of survivors begin with life before the war, brief descriptions of their time in ghettos and camps, and often end with liberation. Julia Lentini's clip ends with her description of liberation from the camp and finding love again by meeting her husband. Such presentations of the Holocaust imply a resolution and a happy ending for survivors, a sentiment not often felt by the survivors themselves.

The American experience is one of pluralism and democracy. At its best, America celebrates the successes of different kinds of people. An American presentation of the Holocaust often relies on the idea of pluralism- from the film version of Anne Frank that plays down her Jewishness to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's emphasis on acceptance- and misunderstandings can occur. The backup material provided on the Shoah Foundation website offers teachers an opportunity to learn about the Holocaust, but little distinction is made between how policies affected Jews and Roma versus political and other prisoners. A downplaying of the genocidal aspect of Nazi policy in favor of a more pluralistic view distorts history and can lead to problems understanding what actually happened, what circumstances allowed it to happen, and why it matters today. While tactics like these make the stories cohesive and comprehensible, important for presentation in schools, some of the thought-provoking and emotional impact is lost.

Oral Testimony and Public Memory

The testimonials survivors give of their experiences in the ghettos and camps do not support the popular memory of the Holocaust. Scholars like Lawrence Langer,

¹⁴ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 351. Shoah Foundation Interviewer Guidelines (USC Shoah Foundation Institute: University of Southern California), 2007.

Henry Greenspan, Geoffrey Hartman and Robert Kraft have begun the difficult task of unpacking survivor testimony. Their works examine the effects of trauma on memory, how different kinds of memory of the Holocaust can exist simultaneously, and how survivors rarely give easy answers to how the Holocaust could have happened or what it means that it did. The stories survivors have to tell rarely match the lessons attached to them. When Lili B., a Polish survivor of five death and concentration camps speaks to students about her life, she hopes students come away realizing that everyone is equal and that hatred has no place in the world. She wants the students she meets with to take her story and apply it to their own lives, and finds way to tell her story so students can identify with it. But how can students incorporate the knowledge that Lili B. knew her parents committed suicide rather than face the death camps into their own lives in a comfortable democracy? Or the story of the death of her “beautiful” 8 year old cousin left alone to die in the gas chambers of Majdanek?

I come back and the couple who were in charge of the barrack. You know there was a German looking for you. “For me?” She told me why. My cousin was one of the beauty, one of the most beautiful children you ever saw. And he did not look like a Jewish child. He looked more like, very dark, with big big black eyes. He cried so in in the gas chamber, going into gas chamber, that apparently the German took pity on him and asked him, “Why are you crying?” And he said, “My mom isn’t here, my aunt and uncle. I want my cousin Lili.” The German, he wasn’t gonna save his life. He was just gonna give him his request and bring me. What did he care? Another Jew die? You know. But I wasn’t there. Never heard from or saw the kid again.¹⁵

Does Lili B.’s brief accounting of her cousin’s terrifying and lonely death have a redeeming message? What can it teach students about intolerance of their schoolmates or about how to be resilient in the face of their challenges? Lili B.’s story is not one of the triumph of good or hope, it is a story of extermination. She does not tell these stories

¹⁵ Lili B. (Holocaust survivor) in interview with author, November 30, 2011.

when speaking with students because she realizes that they do not offer students an opportunity to learn a positive lesson. Telling them only leads to confusion.

Misrepresentation of the Holocaust does no service to survivors or to students who are not learning about how the Holocaust could have happened, but only that it did. Lili B.'s story is not the only one that does not support the ideas of hope, resilience and good overcoming evil that have become the canonized version of the Holocaust in the US.

The taped testimonies already in existence will attest to that.

Lawrence Langer cites the example of a woman he names Schifra V. who speaks of the massacre of tens of thousands of Jews in the Ponary forest outside Vilna, Lithuania. She says, "I will not let them decide when I will die. I will resist that. I refuse to die on their timing."¹⁶ The sentiment in this quote can easily be seen as heroic, but Schifra speaks in the next sentence of how helpless everyone was to affect their fate. Does Schifra's acknowledgement of the feelings of despair negate her previous statement? No, it does not, but it certainly complicates the picture of Jewish options and reactions to the incredible violence around them. The loss of context will lead to a loss of meaning. The human emotional connection can still exist, but what will students learn about the timeline of the Holocaust, its important people and locations, or even how to really work with first person accounts when the clips are so short?

Using the memory of the Holocaust to support various causes does little to encourage the public to encounter the Holocaust as an actual historical event with causes and effects. A more thoughtful and meaningful way to memorialize the Holocaust can still be found. The rigorous study of oral history presents an opportunity

¹⁶ Langer, *Holocaust Testimony: The Ruins of Memory*, 38.

for identifying the issues in Holocaust memory today, and possible solutions. Today, the survivor holds an important place in Holocaust memory. The large collection of oral testimony that has been collected attests to that and makes it possible for the survivor's voice to remain a part of Holocaust memory when the last of the survivors has died. Scholars are in the unique position today of having the ability to both study the taped testimony housed in archives and to also meet and speak with survivors. There is still time to listen to what survivors have to say about their memories of the Holocaust and what meanings, if any, can be found in its study.

Historian Lawrence Langer's careful study of testimony at the Fortunoff Video Archive in his book *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* demonstrates that while many survivors did find love and often created new families, their lives were irreparably harmed under Nazism. Langer argues that constructing survivor stories to support the idea that liberation was a hopeful experience is false. A survivor Langer studied answered that after the war "he knew my troubles were really about to begin" when asked how he felt about liberation.¹⁷ The lasting consequences of genocide on those who survive it has become divorced from the events of the past.

By the 1980s, after the miniseries *Holocaust* brought the mass murder of Jews to public consciousness, survivors began to be invited into classrooms where they lived, especially South Florida, New York and Southern California, and professors at Yale had begun to record survivor testimony. Today, if a school can afford the cost, they can fly a survivor and their liaison from the USHMM in Washington, DC to meet with their students anywhere in the country. Survivor testimony- from a live person or a taped

¹⁷ Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*, 67.

interview- has become important in how the Holocaust is told. Scholars, educators and policy makers began to see that survivors' tears, laughter, pain and memories touched people in a way that other materials could not. Survivors have been asked to share their stories with students at schools or the public in special events at museums, and have also been asked to record their testimony for future use. With different audiences and different purposes, the stories survivors are willing and able to tell can vary widely. Whether a live thirty minute interview with a class or a six hour interview for archival purposes, when used for educational purposes, their testimony has been shaped by the public memory of the Holocaust. Prolonged and in-depth study from various academic disciplines of the testimonies available can be used to address how the Holocaust is remembered in the US and can offer a new more nuanced approach to remembering such a traumatic event.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Looking at how survivor testimony has been used for educational purposes in classrooms and museums across the country demonstrates the deep need for a closer examination of the goals and methods of such an education. Popular Holocaust memory in the U.S. has been crafted by politicians, educators, and Hollywood film producers to reflect the various needs of each group. Trotted out to support foreign action, to decry undemocratic regimes, to attempt to allay bullying, and often even just to make a dollar, the Holocaust's meaning and legacy as a historical event has become distorted. The tools available for teachers created by Hollywood and museums have largely come to reflect the public discourse of tolerance and pluralism on the Holocaust. Whether such an education is creating more civically responsible students remains to be seen. The public meaning of the Holocaust does not align with the private ones of

the individual survivors. The study of oral testimony offers a way to build bridge over the gap between the public and the private memories of the Holocaust that exist in this country, and creates a way to find a more nuanced understanding of the Holocaust as a historical event.

Today, survivors speak to thousands of people in schools, at lectures, and in museum halls across the country. As Henry Greenspan notes, they never “recount in a vacuum”,¹⁸ but always to an audience. The way survivors tell their stories to the public often reflects what they think the public is willing to hear. Coached and encouraged to draw parallels to topics like bullying and the fragility of democracy, survivors who visit schools and speak to audiences at museums tell their stories to reflect those needs. Their taped testimonies, a place that for some survivors offers more of an opportunity to recall freely, can be used in much the same way, but also have the potential to shed new light on what is a dark and terrible history. If memory of the Holocaust remains central to educational efforts in this country, it is imperative that an approach that requires more critical engagement with the history it be found. The large collection of oral testimony that already exists offers a way to find different meanings in the Holocaust that can be used to create a new memory of the Holocaust that better reflects its reality for those who lived through it and for the millions who were murdered.

¹⁸ Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History*, 30.

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