

Stories of Holocaust Survivors as an Educational Tool – Uses and Challenges

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This article discusses the value of using Holocaust survivors' testimonies to educate students on the history of the Holocaust and more globally to help them develop critical thinking and citizenship related skills. We will present the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre (MHMC) project, Witness to History, and its use for educational purposes. In the first part of the paper we describe our oral history project, discuss the process of conducting video interviews and cataloguing the testimonies through a database and offer possibilities for sharing the testimonies with the public. In the second part we introduce some of the challenges faced by historians collecting oral history, such as the subjectivity and selectivity of a testimony, as well as how interaction in the interview situation impacts on the emerging story and to what extent they can be treated as authentic accounts of past events. Finally, we discuss some theoretical concerns related to the use of oral history in the classroom. We propose a methodology for the introduction of testimonies in history class, which promotes understanding of the different contributions of the historian and the witness to history and Holocaust education. We illustrate this methodology through presentation of one of the activities developed by the MHMC for teachers.

“Oral history lets students learn about history from the people who lived it.”

– Katherine Walbert and Jean Sweney Shawver

Having access to the witnesses' version of a historical event brings history to life. The witness was there, and he/she can tell us what happened, with the passion of a participant. It helps us feel a bit as if, we too, had been there. In the classroom, life

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stories have a powerful impact on students.² However, when studying the Holocaust, we must also be cautious about this feeling of proximity with the past.

Oral history offers a remarkable opportunity to further students' learning about history, and it enriches the classroom experience. Indeed, being in contact with a person who lived through an event changes students' relations to the past. Being exposed to life stories enhances student understanding of new historical content and helps them develop and use their critical thinking skills. The emotive charge created by someone's story adds a new dimension to the learning process. It creates personal links between the past, the survivor and the students and in so doing, it increases the interest of the latter for the subject.³

As we will illustrate, life stories have an immense value in education and the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre (MHMC) has actively chosen to share its impressive collection of video testimonies with schools, in the pursuit of its mission of Holocaust education. Moreover, the MHMC can count on the numerous Holocaust survivors who still live in this city and who are ready to share their story with thousands of students every year. This person to person experience has a definitive influence on students – probably more than taped testimonies.⁴ Nonetheless, as the number of Holocaust survivors dwindles, we must adjust our methodology and develop tools using taped rather than live testimonies. The goal of this article is to present how and for what purposes this medium can be used in the classroom.

In this article, we will present the project *Witness to History* and its use for educational purposes. We will discuss the methodological approach and some theoretical concerns related to the use of oral history in history classes. The last part of the article proposes some ideas for teachers who wish to use these documents in their classroom, and presents an example of one of the activities the MHMC has developed.

Why an Oral History Project?

After World War II, Montreal became home to one of the largest Holocaust survivor refugee communities in the world. Although the Montreal Holocaust Memorial

² Nicole Tutiaux-Guillon, "Témoignage, Mémoire... Quel Statut dans l'Enseignement et l'Apprentissage de l'Histoire?" Académie d'Amiens, accessed December 23, 2011, <http://histoire-geo-ec.ac-amiens.fr/?Temoignage-memoire-Quel>.

³ Kathryn Walbert and Jean Sweeney Shawver, *Oral History in the Classroom* (Chapel Hill: Learn NC, 2002), accessed December 23, 2011, <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/pdf/oral-history-in-the-classroom-e68.pdf>. Tutiaux-Guillon, "Témoignage, Mémoire..."

⁴ Conseil de l'Europe, "Le Témoignage du Survivant en Classe: 16 Fiches Pédagogiques," accessed December 23, 2011, http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/roma/Source/Testimony_Classroom_FR.pdf.

Centre (MHMC) began to record survivor life stories in 1994, we started to exploit their educational potential only a few years ago.

In 1976, survivors came together to establish the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre, which operates the only recognized Holocaust museum in Canada. To make this possible, they donated their personal artifacts, pictures and archives. And eventually, some of them chose to donate their stories through either taped or live testimony. These actions were undertaken to achieve the Centre's mission, which is to educate people of all ages and backgrounds about the Holocaust, while sensitizing the public to the universal perils of anti-Semitism, racism, hate and indifference.

Since 1994, testimonies of survivors of the ghettos, labour and death camps, and death marches, partisans, hidden children, liberators, rescuers and Jews who survived the war under other circumstances have been collected. In keeping with the mission, the purpose has been to record the testimony of eye-witnesses whose voices may soon be silenced through illness, aging, and death, to assure that memory and legacy are transferred. The concern was also to confront Holocaust denial through individual stories and to preserve the human dimension of Holocaust history. The educational value of these documents was revealed soon after.

The interviews accurately reflect the personal story of each interviewee and they are a priceless resource for further understanding, research and teaching related to Jewish life before, during, and after the Holocaust.

The Process of Interviewing

The MHMC recorded 472 testimonies between 1994 and 2010. The project continues at an accelerated pace.

The interview process has changed in the sixteen years since the project commenced. Initially, interviewers met the interviewee in person and filled out a pre-interview questionnaire with them. This allowed the interviewer to build up a preliminary story, as well as create a trusting relationship with the interviewee.

Recently, the decision was taken not to do an in-person pre-interview because it was proving problematic in two respects: i) the interviewee began to relate important stories and he/she did not repeat them later when filmed or could not repeat them the same way a second time, or ii) the interviewer had difficulty allowing the interviewee to tell their story at the pre-interview, which may have put a strain on their relationship. However, we give the choice to the interviewer, as some still prefer a face-to-face encounter with their respondents before they meet for the filming.

The taping of the interview is done in a studio to ensure good sound and light quality and to prevent interruptions. Interviewees are encouraged to bring along

photographs, documents and other personal memorabilia which are captured on videotape at the end of the interview.

Cataloguing and Documenting the Collection

At the beginning of the project, the MHMC did not document the collection through a database. Pre-interviews and interviews were done in quick succession and then a detailed summary was prepared. A few years later, the Centre created a FileMaker database, which was used in its initial form until 2010 and has since been upgraded and adapted.

In 2007, the Concordia University Community-University Research Alliance project, *Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide and Other Human Rights Violations*, was created. This five-year oral history project explores Montrealers' experiences and memories of mass violence and displacement. The MHMC actively participated in this project and our collection is now digitized thanks to this partnership.

The digitization of the videos enabled us to create clips and to provide them for broad public viewing. Some of these are now uploaded on the Centre's, *Parole Citoyenne* and *Citizenshift* websites:

- Jean Kutscher on Parole Citoyenne: http://parolecitoyenne.org/node/22395&dossier_nid=22406;
- Gisele Braka on Parole Citoyenne: http://parolecitoyenne.org/gisele-braka-se-rememore-la-fuite-en-bateau-avec-sa-famille-vers-la-tunisie?dossier_nid=22406
- Walter Absil on Citizenshift: <http://citizenshift.org/walter-absil-explains-origin-his-last-name>)

In 2010 the MHMC received a Museum Assistant Program grant from Canadian Heritage. Thanks to this grant, the Centre was able to hire a video archivist to move forward with cataloguing the collection. The database program was updated and upgraded and new fields were added, mostly to include information on the interviewee's relatives. The other innovation consisted of dividing videos into thematic clips such as 'pre-war life', 'life in a concentration camp', 'resistance', etc. Each clip is given a title and can be identified by keywords.

CLIPS					
Keyword		Clip's name	from 00:00:00	to 00:00:00	Tape
Pre-war life, Education, Gypsies, relatives, Living	<input type="checkbox"/>	Life in Lezajsk before war, describes relatives, city, childhood	00:00:00	00:33:00	
Awareness of danger, Emigration attempt, Pre-war life	<input type="checkbox"/>	Knew what was going on in Germany, tried to emigrate to the USA	00:33:00	00:39:44	
Wartime life, Invasion	<input type="checkbox"/>	Germans invaded Poland, Polish burnt synagogues	00:39:44	00:44:30	
Forced relocation	<input type="checkbox"/>	Jews sent to the Russian side in Lviv	00:44:30	00:49:50	
Soviet exile	<input type="checkbox"/>	Aron's family sent to Siberia	00:49:50	00:55:47	
Soviet exile, Forced labour camp	<input type="checkbox"/>	Aron and his family working in a camp in Siberia	00:55:47	01:10:00	
Wartime life	<input type="checkbox"/>	Life in Minusink, Siberia 1941-1945	01:10:00	01:31:00	
Return, Liberation	<input type="checkbox"/>	Return to Poland after end of war 1945	01:31:00	01:38:00	
Illegal immigration	<input type="checkbox"/>	Family moves to Austria via Czechoslovakia 1946	01:38:00	01:41:08	
DP camp, Aid organization	<input type="checkbox"/>	Life in Hallein DP camp	01:41:08	01:52:00	
Emigration, Leaving Europe	<input type="checkbox"/>	Family emigrates to Canada 1950	01:52:00	01:59:00	
Life in Canada, Family event	<input type="checkbox"/>	Created L'amour Industries, married in 1953	01:59:00	02:06:50	
Message	<input type="checkbox"/>	If you're a Jew you have to believe in God	02:06:50	02:11:00	
	<input type="checkbox"/>				
	<input type="checkbox"/>				

This indexing was done to improve accessibility to the content of the videos, both for MHMC staff and researchers. Some clips have already been incorporated into a new educational project and are used for guide-training sessions.

Sharing Video Clips

The MHMC is seeking additional ways to expand the use of the video clips to reach a broader audience and thus ensure that the personal stories of survivors are not forgotten. With the development of new technologies there is a great variety of ways to share clips.

Oral history constitutes an important part of the permanent exhibition in the Holocaust Museum. There is currently approximately one hour of video testimony on display in the museum. The montages were made from excerpts of oral testimonies taped by the MHMC. Through these excerpts the Museum shares individual stories and illustrates history for the benefit of visitors. A better knowledge of the Oral History Collection will enable MHMC staff to renew the existing themes and add new ones to the exhibition.

Video clips will be used for a new multimedia guide project being developed as well. This project is being designed as thematic tours for tablet and smart phone users. Visitors will be able to click on artifacts on display in the museum, and access additional videos, soundtracks and complementary information. The aim of this project is to facilitate better comprehension of the artifacts on display in the museum, their relevance to history, the history of the Holocaust more generally and the human impact of the genocide.

One example of how video clips will be used in this context is provided by Chava F.'s donation and testimony. Among the artifacts donated by Chava F. is a

shoe brush, which we currently have on display in our museum. Luckily for us, Chava speaks about this shoe brush in her testimony, explaining the circumstances and context in which she obtained it. <http://goo.gl/UU8XA>

Another manner in which we plan to share video clips is to create an MHMC YouTube channel. There are several advantages to doing so. First, by uploading videos on YouTube, the MHMC will create a hyperlink for each video. Those links are essential to easily share the videos on other websites. The creation of such a channel will enhance the MHMC's presence on the Internet. Thirdly, it will enable educators to access thematic videos online. They will be able to choose clips linked to their projects.

Challenges of Collecting Oral History

We would like to raise some theoretical issues that educators using oral history must consider; most of them related to the narrative process it involves. These are challenges and limitations with which oral historians are very familiar.

Collecting a Point of View

When using life history interviews, we must remember that they are not objective. All personal narrations show the subjective viewpoint of the speaker, his/her interpretations of situations, events, actions and actors. In order to use testimonies as historical accounts, it is important to try to focus on the specific experience of the person rather than on his or her interpretation of history. It is the status of the witness that is most important. We want the witness to talk about what happened in his/her life, or how his/her life was changed or disrupted. We do not want witnesses to act as historians because they are not.

Selectivity and Legitimizing

The interviewee cannot relate everything. Therefore he/she only selects certain parts of his/her life to be told. The narration of the life history is a reflective process.⁵ The narration affects the emerging story, because every time the individual relates his/her story, there is an attempt to explain him/herself and (re)interpret his/her past in a way that corresponds to his/her actual situation and identity. The testimony shared is therefore a representation of the past as the narrator thinks it was, but this representation is created according to present circumstances and needs. How the interviewee interprets

⁵ Éva V. Huseby-Darvas, "Migrating Inward and Out: Validating Life-Course Transitions through Oral Autobiography," in *Life History as a Cultural Construction/Performance*, ed. T. Hófer and P. Niedermüller (Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Science, 1988): 381-382.

the expectations of his/her present audience – youth, adults, medias or simply, the interviewer – will also influence the narration.⁶

The effort to consolidate and legitimate one's past and present and to ensure homogeneity and internal coherence may lead to the distortion of the past. In certain cases, the individual transforms the past or ignores certain aspects of the past in order to digest traumas and maintain his/her psychological balance. The distortion during the narration is not necessarily conscious.

For instance, in our interview with Margrit K., it is clear that she does not want to talk about her relatives' fate. The last time she saw them, they were in Auschwitz. She never saw them again. This was the end of the story for her. She tries to protect herself from this trauma by ignoring the question asked by the interviewer.

<http://goo.gl/QntH6>

Another example is provided by Abraham M. He does not remember what happened during the three days he spent on a train to Auschwitz. The problem is not that he does not want to speak about it. He simply does not remember. He blocked this memory in order to protect himself psychologically from this distressing experience.

<http://goo.gl/Owp8A>

Narrated life history is not equivalent to a listing of independent past events. Stories are embedded in a meaningful context that consists of the narrator's present life circumstances and anticipated future. They reflect the way the narrator recalls them now and not the way he/she experienced them at the time. This context determines the way the speaker establishes thematic and temporal links between specific stories.

For instance, David S.R. describes how his father was shot in the nose in the early 1920s. Instead of following the chronology and finishing the description of this event, he explains how his father still had the bullet in his head when he was in Auschwitz and that it expelled itself only years later. <http://goo.gl/DTc1F>

In short, since oral history is usually retrospective, we are faced with the problem of selective memory. The recollection of the past is a process in which the individual selects and orders the events of his/her life. This selection is shaped by the desire to coherently link the past to the present and thus make sense of his/her life course. The representation and evaluation of the past changes in time as a result of the development of the personality and circumstances of the narrator, and the wider social and historical context. Political, cultural, and economic circumstances as well as changing social norms and values can strongly influence the way the individual reinterprets his/her personal past. The past is constantly reinterpreted both on individual and collective levels. In consequence, individual recollection is shaped by

⁶ Annette Wieviorka, *Déportation et Génocide: Entre la Mémoire et l'Oubli* (Paris: Hachette, 2003).
A. Wieviorka, *L'Ère du Témoin* (Paris: Hachette, 1998).

the interpretation of the past through collective memory and the “expectations for the future.”⁷

Interaction and Its Impact

Recorded life history established through an interview process is not an entity existing independently of the interview situation but the product of a joint effort of the researcher and the interviewee. It involves an interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee and this has significant consequences.⁸ The interview situation and the interviewer both influence the narrator and this is reflected in one way or another in the interview. For example the interviewee might have witnessed a historically significant event without being aware of it and if the interviewer is not familiar with that event, the story will remain untold.

One of our interviewees spent some time in a little known camp called Wulkow. When he was first interviewed, he did not dwell on this subject because the interviewer did not realize the significance of his testimony on this particular camp. The interviewee only began to speak more extensively about it when he was interviewed again by a researcher who knew how rare it was to come across a survivor who spent time in Wulkow.

Another example of how an interviewer might affect the narration occurs when the interviewer is him/herself a survivor. We have instances where an interviewee assumes an interviewer has a particular level of knowledge or familiarity with Holocaust education and history and therefore does not explain critical facts or expand on particular topics. These crucial gaps in narration can only be avoided if the interviewer is conscious of the pitfalls of being seen as “an insider” to the story, and therefore asks appropriate questions to ensure that missing details are added or clarified for the benefit of future readers and listeners.

Emerging stories of life history are not prefabricated; they are affected by the relationship of the interviewer and the interviewee, which in turn is affected by their respective ages, social and cultural backgrounds. For example some survivors are more at ease telling their story to an older interviewer than to a younger one because they feel that a person closer to their own age will better understand their history and their emotions. Survivors often prefer Jewish interviewers to non-Jewish ones because they trust them more and feel that they may provide more sympathy or solidarity. The narrative is also influenced by the interviewee's interpretation of the

⁷ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

⁸ Péter Niedermüller, “From the History of Life to Life History,” in *Life History as a Cultural Construction/Performance*, ed. T. Hófer and P. Niedermüller (Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Science, 1988): 458-459.

subject of the interview and the hidden (or even unconscious) intentions to project a specific image of him/herself.

The Question of Authenticity

Recollections of certain periods in history can be seriously altered in the light of subsequent events. For example, according to our experiences, many elderly people in Hungary today retain a somewhat “rosy” picture of the 1930s despite the fact that it was a period of significant hardship. This might well be because, following the horrors of WWII, the hardships of the previous decade seemed to have been minor. In addition to this difficulty, we have observed that some people recall second-hand information about events as their own first-hand experiences, which sometimes has the effect of masking their own actual experiences.

One of the questions raised by social historians using oral history is whether or to what extent it is possible to reconstruct an authentic history on the basis of life histories. In most cases, people cannot recall unique events; they might be able to trace their influence on their daily life but they would find it difficult to recount exactly what had happened regarding that event. On the other hand, recurrent events, daily practices, characters and atmosphere are much better remembered. For example, in his video, David S.R. speaks about his school years. Not only does he remember the daily routine well, but he also describes one specific moment of his life as a student. His teacher asked him to answer questions about geography because he was a model student. <http://goo.gl/VFsVG>

Thus, oral history testimony can be used to understand how individuals experience history, including what meanings they assign to different events and processes and what role they assign to themselves and others.⁹ Historians and students must consider these documents as another historical source and treat them just as they would serial accounts or photographs. This means that they must perform a critical analysis of the external and internal context.

Life Stories in the Classrooms

Oral history has not yet become widely used in formal education, even though it offers great potential. The Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre strives to integrate oral history into its educational tools because it is our firm conviction that survivor testimonies provide an important, personal and direct access to history. We advise, however, that several issues should be discussed by teachers in class before they use oral histories with their students.

⁹ A. Kovács, “Szóról Szóra,” *Bukasz*, 1 (1992).

Distinguishing History and Memory

A testimony is in essence a recollection of a past time. It is a discourse about the past, it is not the past. This fact is very important. History is also a discourse about the past, but it is an informed and documented reconstitution, based on documents properly analyzed according to the principles of the historical method, although that analysis may be somewhat subjective. As memory is based mainly on an individual experience, it is eminently linked with the identity of the person. It is thus emotional and rarely objective. This does not mean that it is not true. Teachers need to address the nature of both memory and history with their students.

Todorov proposes focusing on different actors creating a discourse about the past: the witness and the historian.¹⁰ In a unit of study on the Holocaust, it is worthwhile to take some time to discuss this question. Minimally, the differences in view and role between the historian and the witness should be presented. Otherwise, they could easily take the content presented in testimonies as the “true truth”. It is indeed well known that students tend to consider the witness as the most credible source of information.¹¹

Students need to reflect on the different kinds of documents used by historians to build their representation of the past. The historian makes sense of many sources of different origins: serial documents, diaries, newspapers, photographs, to name a few. In the same way, teachers should give students the opportunity to analyze other documents to gain another perspective on a given event. In so doing, students reconstruct the past and come to understand the nature and value of each kind of document.

In the meantime, the oral history testimony will be presented and understood by students as a historical document with its specific attributes. This document must be placed in its context of production. To do so, students might answer a few questions, including: Who is the witness? What is the status of the witness? In our case, the witnesses are the exceptions because the majority of the victims of the Holocaust have not survived to tell the horrors they have suffered or seen.¹² Why is the witness sharing his/her story; what is the intention? In conducting this exercise, the students are building their own point of view on the value of the testimony. Further, these questions might connect the students more personally to the testimony and allow them to interpret it more critically.

¹⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, *Mémoire du Mal, Tentation du Bien* (Paris: Robert Lafond, 2000).

¹¹ Nadine Fink and Charles Heimberg, “Transmettre la Critique de la Mémoire,” in *Culture et Mémoire*, ed. Carola Hahnel-Mesnard, Marie Liénard-Yétérián and Cristina Marinas (Palaizeau: Editions de l’École Polytechnique, 2008). N. Lautier, *À la Rencontre de l’Histoire* (Lille: Septentrion, 1997). Tutiaux-Guillon, “Témoins, Témoignages.”

¹² Primo Levi, *Les Naufragés et les Rescapés: Quarante Ans Après Auschwitz* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

Another feature of the production context to be considered is the fact that the witness is not making his/her declaration immediately after the event took place, but decades after. This time lapse needs to be discussed: the probable impact and the effect on the accuracy of the narrative. Does it make the narrative more or less accurate? Or, is it more objective, because the witness had time to distance him/herself? The context for the interview might also be discussed. Is there a “mise en scène”? These questions would help students understand the nature of testimony as a discourse about the past as constructed in the present.

Once the external context of production is analyzed, students should concentrate on the content of the document. The testimony might not provide details on the circumstances leading to the event or dates, names of places or people. As the person’s discourse is based on memory and on the subjective interpretation of the past, it should not be seen as an indisputable truth, but as a truthful story about the past. Students should be reminded that the witness does not have access to other historical document. The possible distinction between the description of what happened to the witness and the meaning that the witness is assigning to this experience must be established. Oral history is therefore one of the sources for understanding history, but cannot be used exclusive of other sources.

The Holocaust, like any major historical event, is complex, multifaceted and involves different actors at different times. Thus, it is important to emphasize that testimony is only a fragment of history. It is the manifestation of one person’s experience. Not only is it very personal but it sometimes refers to a microscopic component of the larger picture. However, testimonies also illustrate a dimension of history that cannot otherwise be understood. They present knowledge about the impact of history on human beings and communities in a way that other historical analyses often ignore.

A Powerful Contribution to History

Oral history and life stories form an invaluable educational resource in teaching the history of the Holocaust for several reasons.

First and foremost, survivor testimonies are individual stories which present the “original” version of a historical event, the magnitude of which is sometimes difficult to grasp. By learning about concrete changes in a person’s daily life which were caused by this dramatic event, students understand the Holocaust from the inside, from the perspective of the survivors. The testimony of Jacob F. talking about Kristallnacht provides a good example of this phenomenon.

By bringing together various testimonies, we can help students understand the wide variety of Holocaust experiences: the life of children hidden in attics, barns or secret rooms, the need to change their identity and religion, the cruel deportation to labour or death camps, the armed resistance in the forests of Belarus and the revolts

in the ghettos, the rescue and escape to more hospitable lands overseas. Several dimensions of these events can be explored through life stories. When woven together, these stories can assist in reflecting and accounting for the complexity of the Holocaust. These multiple experiences can also undo prejudice about Jews, who can sometimes be assessed stereotypically.

One of the MHMC video montages, entitled *One Tragedy, Different Personal Stories*, illustrates the diversity of experiences during the Holocaust. It presents five survivors, each of whom describes one particular event he or she went through during World War II. Abraham M. was taken to a labour camp in Siberia with his family, while Michael K. explains how he enrolled in a partisan group. Anka V., who lived in Shanghai at the time, speaks about the consequences of Pearl Harbour for her, whereas Ellen T. describes how she was deported by train to the concentration camp of Westerbork. Finally, Lilian Klein talks about her arrival in Auschwitz. (link to video *One Tragedy, Different Personal Stories*)

Similarly, the more a viewer watches survivor testimonies, the more he or she can learn about other actors in this tragic story. The personal experiences of those who survived invariably involve others such as rescuers, officials and networks of resistance, as well as perpetrators. When provided with concrete examples of such experiences, students are better able to understand the otherwise hardly conceivable.

What is the Value of the Witness' Voice in Education?

There are several reasons to use survivor interviews in a unit on the Holocaust. We often hear that individual life stories restore a sense of dignity to the survivor. Behind the number of 6 million deaths stands culture, life and traditions. It is not rare that the victims' values are reduced to their number.¹³ Life stories allow us to avoid this problem and to capture the daily lives of people whose normal way of life was disrupted and changed forever. In depicting their lives before the Holocaust – the joys and sorrows, happiness and hardships – the witnesses restore a human dimension and individual identity to the millions of victims. Their stories portray Jewish culture and traditions. A three-dimensional identity of both victims and survivors is therefore revealed and a certain type of humanity restored.

Personal testimonies can help students to develop a deeper understanding of the Holocaust. The survivors' stories allow them to appreciate why it was difficult or impossible to resist the oppressor. Indeed, this question is often heard in classrooms, but is rarely discussed. The stories demonstrate in particular the instability experienced by the survivors and victims, including the limited financial resources of many Jews, which made it almost impossible to travel from one country to another.

¹³ Georges Bensoussan, *Auschwitz en Héritage? D'un Bon Usage de la Mémoire* (Paris: Éditions Mille et une Nuits, 1998).

Moreover, some countries had closed their borders. Similarly, life stories can help teachers respond to students struggling to understand the different context within which the Holocaust is set. For example, given the high mobility of people today, many students have difficulty understanding how moving from one country to another was dangerous for Jews in Nazi Germany. This is so even when it is explained to them that they were a people attempting to flee without identity papers and often facing a hostile population. Life stories share examples of how Jews often had to hide during the day and walk at night, and how most of them would not dare to take a train because they could be spotted during the frequent monitoring and control of passengers. Testimonies can be used to help students understand that Jews had to make difficult decisions with significant impact on their lives, without really knowing what was happening around them. Watching and listening to a personal story can help establish for students that Jews had to be on the move or hiding all the time, which had a serious uprooting effect and left most without a social network. Understanding these core elements of the Jewish experience during World War II can help students understand the circumstances they faced and the scope of the Holocaust.

On a pedagogical level, using oral histories in the classroom allows teachers to bring students closer to history by offering them a more human dimension through the depiction of events on the scale of the individual. Those survivors who have participated in our *Witness to History* project talk about facts of everyday life and interactions with family and friends to which students can relate much better than to statistics. In circumstances of live testimony, reciprocal links are also sometimes created between the witnesses and the students.

These reciprocal links must, however, be controlled. Teachers should address the question of emotions and talk with their students about how hard it is for witnesses to speak of events so personal and distressing. They should also warn students that some of them may react emotionally to the presentation.

For instance, in his interview, Abraham M. speaks about his arrival at Auschwitz. Like many survivors, he speaks about the transport by train from a ghetto, and he mentions the selection at the entrance of the concentration camp. But he also speaks about his mother and how it was the last time he saw her. At that point he becomes very emotional. It is hard, both for him to talk about this experience and for his audience to witness his pain. It becomes even more difficult when he describes the kind of body search women were subjected to before entering the ghetto. Students should be prepared for this before watching such testimonies.

<http://goo.gl/JYMcg>

Oral History in our Educational Tools

In accordance with its mission to educate about the Holocaust, the *Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre* provides educational tools for teachers in Quebec. One of these tools addresses the question of Canadian intervention during the Holocaust. To consider this question, the decisions and actions of the Canadian government, as well as individual and collective initiatives in Canada, are discussed. To assist in illustrating the difficulty of finding refuge in Canada during the war years, we have chosen to present four stories of survivors from three different countries, all of whom managed to escape from Europe and come to Canada on board of a Portuguese ship called the *Serpa Pinto*. Students are invited to mobilize their analytical skills to analyze documents of diverse origins such as identity papers, passports, tickets and immigration documents, and to carry out a critical historical analysis of these interviews.

The videos depict four destinies, four people facing the same dangers, but in three different countries: France, Germany and Croatia. These four stories show life before the war in the respective countries of the storyteller, the beginning of the war, which was different in each country, the way Jews were treated in different places, the need to hide and flee, the fears, but also the help they received and the hope they nurtured. The four survivors followed a similar path: they had to cross the Pyrenees from France to Spain to finally arrive in Portugal, a neutral country, where they could embark on the *Serpa Pinto* bound for the Americas. They all arrived in Montreal between 1942 and 1944. The four witnesses present their arrival in Quebec's largest city and the challenges they had to face to rebuild their lives.

To integrate these testimonies into our activity on Canada's intervention during the Holocaust, we screened interviews recorded by the *Holocaust Centre* and select the relevant portions to use in the educational tool. This involved making a selection accounting for about one tenth of an interview or even less. The selections are therefore a fragment of each person's story that we have chosen to use to teach students. This choice is based primarily on pedagogical and educational objectives, as well as our commitment to avoid distortion of the individual experience. In editing personal narratives in this way, we recognize that there is a risk that we will not integrate those parts of a story that the storyteller considers most important. We recognize that sometimes the educational goals differ from the individual intentions of a storyteller and survivor.¹⁴

¹⁴ Tutiaux-Guillon, "Témoins, Témoignages."

Conclusion

For an organization like the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre, dedicated in large part to the teaching of Holocaust history and to human rights education, integrating oral history into its commemoration work, events and educational projects is essential. Indeed, the project of collecting testimonies of Holocaust survivors responds to several purposes. First, it fills the objective to remember and transmit memory. Second, oral history addresses the need felt by survivors to tell their stories and ensure that the event and their understanding of the Holocaust will not be forgotten. And last but not least, the *Witness to History* project meets the objective to educate future generations, so they learn to reflect on this period in the context of civic education and use the information in their lives. Each of these dimensions of the project contributes to fulfilling the Centre's mission to educate people of all ages and backgrounds about the Holocaust, while sensitizing the public to the universal perils of anti-Semitism, racism, hate and indifference.

The objective of collecting and using the testimonies of survivors of such a traumatic period for educational purposes faces significant constraints. The subjective dimension of the narrative, the emotion it contains and the problematic nature of memory each pose real challenges. Despite this, these challenges are not insurmountable. This paper has discussed how life stories can be used as an effective and appropriate educational tool. They can further the understanding of the historical experience of individuals, as well as personalizing and humanizing an event as vast, complex and potentially alienating as the Holocaust. In analyzing different types of documents, students will recognize the specific nature and contributions of testimonies and will be able to use these documents in an appropriate way. It is for these reasons that the Centre develops educational tools that include testimonies of survivors and facilitate the historical study and understanding of the most human and individual dimension of the Holocaust.

As we face a significantly aging survivor population, our work to continue to record their stories has become a race against time. This race is necessary if we are to continue to document oral histories and to better understand the community of survivors who came to Montreal during and after the Holocaust. We see this work, and the rich material it yields, as a crucial part of documenting not only the lives of people touched by the Holocaust, but of Canada's history and the history of immigration to this country. There are still several interviews to be made and, with them, incredible discoveries to be uncovered.