

The Memory Project:

Capturing Holocaust History Through Memoir

Introduction

In the book On Listening to Holocaust Survivors, Henry Greenspan discusses the lack of appropriate words to describe experiences during the Holocaust. “Ideally,” he says, “our speaking and writing on this topic should proceed differently than it manageably can. Key terms should be in quotation marks – ‘murdered,’ ‘survival,’ ‘the aftermath’ – to convey that their referents are radically unlike what we usually mean by ‘someone killing someone else,’ ‘living through and after,’ ‘the repercussions of an event now past.’” (Greenspan, 1998, p. 7) Greenspan refers to Primo Levi’s discussion of this specific problem in Survival in Auschwitz (1986):

Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say “hunger,” we say “tiredness,” “fear,” “pain,” we say “winter” and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the Lagers had lasted longer, a new, harsh language would have been born. (Levi, 1986, p. 123)

The problem of appropriately relating experiences during the Holocaust is understandable. The sense of duty and obligation to share these experiences and memories, though, is real and present for many Holocaust survivors. Relatively few have the opportunity to speak and even fewer are comfortable speaking publicly. It is essential to provide survivors other outlets through which to share their memories. At the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), 64 Holocaust survivors volunteer their time, some as many as eight hours a week. Some spend their time speaking to student

and community groups but the majority work “behind-the-scenes,” translating documents, doing administrative tasks, and consulting on exhibitions. All work out of a sense that the story must be told. Few, however, are able to convey their own feelings and memories, as they do not have the opportunity to actively tell their stories.

In answer to this need, an ongoing series of writing workshops was developed. They are designed to teach the Holocaust survivor participants the writing process, including style, grammar and structure. The aim is to guide them in the production of a document for their family members, as well as for historical archives. This provision has met the need of many Survivors who want to tell their story but do not have the right “place” or “time.” It allows more of them to “speak” and to fulfill the sense of duty and obligation they carry with them daily.

History of Holocaust Survivor Writing Workshops

Two well-known and documented Writing Workshops were designed and administered specifically for Holocaust survivors in the United States before the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum began its *Memory Project*. The first began in 1994 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (USA) with the specific intention of publishing a book of memoirs in short story form, written by Holocaust survivors and liberators. The second is a continuing series of writing workshops at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey (USA) and the basis for USHMM’s *Memory Project*. The “Drew model” will be discussed in more detail.

In Pittsburgh, Sheila Chamovitz, a documentary filmmaker, had the idea to allow survivors to share their stories in writing. She went against what might have seemed natural to her – recording video footage of survivor testimony – to find a model that would allow the survivor complete control over the telling of their story, as well as allowing time for

contemplation and revision. With the help of the Holocaust Center of Pittsburgh, Chamovitz coordinated a series of writing workshops. (Brostoff and Chamovitz, 1998)

The writers in Pittsburgh “were asked to focus on a singular experience, one that haunted or even warmed them” and write about it at home. At their request, these writers approved all editing before publishing. The result of the Pittsburgh series of writing workshops is the exceptional anthology, **Flares of Memory**, published in 1998 by Oxford University Press. (Brostoff and Chamovitz, 1998)

A second series of writing workshops for Holocaust survivors is ongoing at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey (USA). Drew’s writing workshop grew from an idea of Dr. Ellen Gerstle, then a Ph.D. candidate at the school. Ellen’s daughter asked her grandfather, a Holocaust Survivor, to share his experiences as a refugee from Nazi Germany. Her grandfather responded with eight single-spaced, typed pages that described his life in Europe and the United States before, during and after the war. His essay taught Ellen stories she had never known and might not have learned had her daughter not asked some probing questions. She asked herself, “Why has he never told this before?” She realized the answer was quite simply that no one had ever asked. She realized also that writing was the only way for her father-in-law to transmit such painful memories. (Saltzman, 2000)

As a result, Dr. Ellen Gerstle, Dr. Jacqueline Berke and Dr. Robert Ready organized Drew University’s survivor writing workshop, “***Leave-A-Legacy***.” Originally intended as a one-time class, Drew’s workshop revealed that Survivor participants wanted additional support and guidance from the professors involved. Drew’s Center for Holocaust/Genocide Study published a special literary insert of their survivor’s workshop writing in their magazine, ***Perspectives on the Holocaust***, and distributed it to their mailing list and student body, as well as to the

Survivors and their families. After much success, the organizers amended the model to include three more follow-up sessions and eventually expanded it to a program that continues today and will go on indefinitely. In their sessions, survivors approach the specific points of writing (detail, theme, etc.) and are given broad assignments about which to write. Some topic examples include food and liberation. Survivor writers also review the editing of the essays submitted by other participants. In short, these workshops provide an opportunity for local Survivors to learn about writing so that they can preserve their memories on paper as a written legacy for their families and communities. An added benefit is that these will enrich resources for teaching the Holocaust.

History of USHMM's *Memory Project*

The idea for a writing project for USHMM's Survivor Volunteers began with a conversation between this writer and Dr. Ann Saltzman (Professor of Psychology, Drew University and co-Director of Drew University's Center for Holocaust/Genocide Study) regarding the reluctance of survivors to share their experiences. Dr. Saltzman explained the "Leave-A-Legacy" project and her Center's eagerness to share the model and its success. In fact, Dr. Jacqueline Berke and Dr. Ellen Gerstle attended the Second Annual Conference of Holocaust Educators held at Yad Vashem in October 1999 and presented a paper about their workshop entitled "Leave-a-Legacy Writing Workshop." In their paper and presentation, they described their Center's eagerness "to spread the word" and to encourage other local Holocaust centers to develop and administer their own writing workshops. (Berke and Gerstle, 1999)

This paper is a follow-up to Berke and Gerstle's presentation in 1999. It is a documentation of Drew's success in passing this idea on to the United States Holocaust

Memorial Museum. It is also a demonstration of the success of USHMM in adopting the Drew University model to accommodate the Survivor participants in Washington, DC

Drew's goal of sharing their model was realized when USHMM invited Drs. Berke, Gerstle, and Ready to demonstrate the "Leave-A-Legacy" project for USHMM's Survivor Volunteers. The Drew professors demonstrated the workshop in Washington, DC three times. Margaret Peterson, a writing workshop instructor and graduate of the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars, observed the last two workshops. Ms. Peterson witnessed the success of the survivor writing workshop and melded her own experiences with elements of Drew's program to create the *Memory Project*. She facilitates the ongoing writing workshop series for USHMM, meeting with survivor writers monthly. Both Drew's "Leave-a-Legacy" writing workshops and USHMM's *Memory Project* encourage the writing of short essays about specific moments of the survivor's experience. Neither is intended as a seminar to teach survivors to write a complete manuscript of their experiences. The following will detail the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's *Memory Project*.

Procedure

After three demonstration sessions by professors from Drew University's Center for Holocaust/Genocide study, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum began its own, independent series of Holocaust survivor writing workshops under the leadership of Ms. Peterson. USHMM provides workshops for survivor volunteers who work at the museum on a regular basis. Each workshop includes eight to twelve attendees (with fifteen currently enrolled). We recommend that no more than fifteen participants be included in a workshop of this type. The USHMM writers meet in a conference room in USHMM's administrative center. The

workshop resembles a college seminar with all participants sitting around a large table. Every member of the group can see every other member's face clearly and can hear all readings and discussion. Ms. Peterson sits at the head of the table, with participants on both sides.

Sessions begin with a discussion of the previous session's homework. Participants provide copies of their writing assignments to Ms. Peterson in advance, either via email or by regular mail. She prepares copies of each essay for every workshop member so that they may read along and refer for commenting. She also prepares personal comments for each writer prior to the meeting. The classroom discussion begins with each author reading his or her own essay to the group. Following each reading, the group provides the author verbal commentary, critique, and any written comments on their individual copies of the essay. This continues until each interested and willing participant shares his or her paper.

The seminar continues with a discussion of an element of writing style, including a reading of an excerpt or example of published Holocaust survivor memoir. Primo Levi's **Survival in Auschwitz** and Charlotte Delbo's **Auschwitz and After** have proven excellent sources for examples of Holocaust memoir. (Note: It has been important to the group of survivor writers in Washington, DC that any excerpts used for writing style and example be a nonfiction memoir of a Holocaust survivor.)

Using a Delbo or Levi excerpt as a basis, Holocaust survivor participants are asked to write for approximately fifteen minutes. The broad instruction is to write about a memory triggered by the reading, by either the style or the content, or anything else they feel inspired to put on paper. After fifteen minutes or so, participants share their short work with the group for comment and criticism. The homework for the following session stems from this assignment. It includes the following choices: revising and expanding the fifteen-minute writing exercise from

the current session, revising a previous essay or writing sample, or writing something altogether new. During the course of the following month, the writer provides Ms. Peterson with material for the next session's discussion.

In addition to Ms. Peterson, this writer is a fixture at the monthly meetings of the *Memory Project*. As coordinator and administrator of the writing workshops, I provide a liaison between USHMM, the survivor volunteers and Ms. Peterson. My experience and expertise in working with Holocaust survivors provides Ms. Peterson a resource as her assistant in the writing workshop. My role is to coordinate time, place and materials for the monthly writing workshops. The minimal supplies include only pens and pencils, paper and folders.

The Future of USHMM's *Memory Project*

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum will continue to offer monthly writing workshops to its survivor volunteers. The written pieces will be compiled for distribution to the survivors, their families, and USHMM staff (to provide an additional means of getting to know our survivor volunteers), as well as to USHMM historical archives. We are hopeful that survivor essays will be posted on the museum's website and that publication in some form will be possible to reach the widest audience possible. Priority, however, is placed on making the survivors' memories accessible and available to their families.

We continue to work with Drew University and maintain ties with their Center for Holocaust/Genocide Study. The USHMM has also been sharing information about our *Memory Project* across the United States. Information is gained largely by word-of-mouth, and interest is strong. We want to continue to work with our colleagues to spread the word of these successful workshops.

On January 27, 2002, Ms. Peterson and I demonstrated a Holocaust survivor memoir writing workshop for The Holocaust Memorial/Miami Beach, Florida (USA). It was a successful start to their monthly meetings of Holocaust survivor writers. We hope that interest continues to build and that we will be able to share through demonstration and example with other Holocaust resource and education centers worldwide.

References

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