

March 2024

Apertures in Recollections A Mental Trauma Response to the Holocaust Experience

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Apertures in Recollections
A Mental Trauma Response to the Holocaust Experience

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts
Department of Religious Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
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Date of Approval:
March 5, 2024

Keywords: Genocide, Memory, Interview, Jewish

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ABSTRACT

Apertures in recollections studies the interview process used with Holocaust survivors as a method of assisting them in filling the gaps in their memories. Holocaust survivors were subjected to life altering experiences that have caused holes in the memories they share with us. In this thesis I go over the efficacy of multiple session interviewing to enhance a trauma survivors' memory of events. The methodology of Dori Laub and Henry Greenspan is used to enhance the way I witnessed a personal experience while transcribing Helen Kahan's interview for The Florida Holocaust Museum's Dimensions in Testimony exhibit. Using these perspectives I determine that Greenspan's method is superior in addressing the dissociative amnesia amongst the population of Holocaust survivors and creates the space for them to be able to fill in the gaps in the memory of their experience post Holocaust.

CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

“The Holocaust experience, the survivors, as asserters of life out of the very disintegration and deflation of the old culture, unwittingly embody a cultural shock value that has not yet been assimilated.”¹ Holocaust survivors bear witness to an experience that most are unable to fathom. They survived an order that was meant to exterminate them completely. The volume of trauma their mental state had to endure is overwhelming. Such a magnitude of trauma leads to lifelong effects beyond the experience, one of them being apertures in recollections of the experience itself. Scholars describe these apertures in a trauma victims’ recollections as dissociative amnesia. “Dissociative amnesia is a disorder characterized by retrospectively reported memory gaps. These gaps involve an inability to recall personal information, usually of a traumatic or stressful nature.”² In this instance an individual telling their story has what could be considered a “gaping hole of genocide, and the gaping hole of silence.”³ These holes in their stories occurred as a form of mental self-preservation often unknowingly to the survivor.

¹ Laub, Dori. “Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening” Essay. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 57-74. New York, NY: Routledge, 1992.

² Leong, Stephanie, Wendi Waits, and Carroll Diebold. “Dissociative Amnesia and DSM-IV-TR Cluster C Personality Traits.” *Psychiatry* (Edgmont (Pa. : Township)), January 2006. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2990548/>.

³ Ibid.

In my thesis, I will show the efficacy of multiple session interviewing to enhance a trauma survivors' memory of events. In chapter 1, I am going to provide you with the background information that occurred throughout the Holocaust in order to paint a picture of the experiences that Holocaust survivors were subjected to, to further understand what led to the memory loss that is being combated. Throughout the course of chapter 2, I am going to explain Dori Laub's approach in bearing witness to testimony as a form of recollecting a Holocaust survivors' memory of their experience. In chapter 3, I will analyze Henry Greenspan's method of multiple session interviewing as a form of continuous conversation to assist Holocaust survivors in accessing their fullest memory of the experience. As you move on to chapter 4, I will take you on a journey back to my internship experience at The Florida Holocaust museum and how I witnessed Greenspan's methodology in person through the interview of Helen Kahan for the Dimensions in Testimony exhibit, where her memory was encouraged by the process of telling her story repeatedly over the course of multiple sessions in various ways. Concluding with my final chapter, I will explain the practice that I believe works best to address the problem of Holocaust survivors reclaiming their lost memories. With this approach, I believe we will be able to make the most difference by assisting the remaining survivors of the Holocaust in telling their full story. The approach I resonate most with will create a space for survivors to fill in the apertures in their recollections and comfort them as they work to make meaning of their stories.

CHAPTER TWO:

HOLOCAUST HISTORY

The Holocaust occurred from 1933 to 1945. Throughout this time period, the systematic extermination of six million Jews over multiple measures of extermination took place and became known in history as the “Final Solution”. The “Final Solution” consisted of genocide and took place from 1941 to 1945.

When the Nazi’s expanded into a multitude of countries, they not only took over their regions, they turned their inhabitants into allies. Little by little the surface area that a Jew could seek sanctuary in began to shrink until eventually there was nothing left. This new world order did not appear overnight and it did not occur at the hands of one individual. There were many stepping stones that led to what would go down in history as the Final Solution. The first step in this process was depicting the Jews as the enemies of society. With individuals convinced into thinking this, it’s easier to sway them against the population that was being targeted. It is immensely difficult to survive in a world that is completely against you, this leaves you with nowhere to turn.

Propaganda geared towards painting the Jewish population as subhuman members of society resulted in an atmosphere tarnished with segregation and hostility at its core. There is power in numbers and this became evident as Jews found it difficult to obtain work, or even a place to reside. Every door was being closed in their face in an effort to cause them to feel isolated and choose to emigrate. Victimization was a fear tactic that was being imposed on the

Jewish population in order to manipulate them into having no choice but to conform to the Nazis dictations.

In June of 1941, the Einsatzgruppen were introduced to the Jewish community. These mobile execution squads were composed of Nazi's and collaborators that took it upon themselves to enter the communities that Jews had freshly occupied and shoot indiscriminately resulting in the death of over a million individuals. Antisemitism was the primary motive for Nazi aggression towards the Jewish community. Jews bore the weight of the vast range of problems that were being witnessed in the German economy. This included anything from political policies to social disagreements. The loss of World War I was the biggest target they carried of all. While Jewish citizens did not have control over any of these outcomes and occurrences, they had been made to look as the conductors and masterminds of all. This assisted in painting Jews as outsiders in a society that consisted of German culture values. Jewish citizens became known as the inferior race in society.

The hatred that plagued the Jewish community during the Holocaust began centuries prior, in Europe. The difference between what began centuries ago and what developed through the Holocaust, was the type of antisemitism that was being experienced by the Jewish community. During the Holocaust Jews were categorized as an entire excluded race that were dangerous and inferior. Considered as tarnished physically and emotionally, their very blood made them mediocre in the eyes of the German society they were enveloped in.

Persecution of the Jewish community was portrayed in an assortment of ways. Antisemitic laws were constructed to assist the various avenues that would promote the elimination of the Jewish race. Propaganda became geared toward portraying Jewish citizens as the problem in society causing Jewish owned businesses to eventually have no choice but to

close their doors due to the communities they resided in completely boycotting them. As time went on, the star of David became a permanent brand of every member of the Jewish race. This star was required to be worn by all Jewish people and carried the weight of serious consequences if dismissed.

Kristallnacht, known in history as The Night of Broken Glass was the catalyst for the move to systematic rounding up of Jews and taking them to camps. This occurrence resulted in the complete destruction of a magnitude of Jewish owned businesses, synagogues where they would worship, and the homes where Jews resided. Simultaneously as this destruction was occurring, Nazi officials rounded up thirty thousand Jewish men and deported them to concentration camps. These individuals had done nothing to justify an arrest and were simply taken due to them being Jewish. Following the violent riots that transpired during Kristallnacht, the very community that was targeted was now being held responsible to pay one billion in taxes derived from the damages.

Losing their source of income, their homes, and their place in the communities that they resided in, Jewish individuals had no choice but to emigrate. The Nazi's had succeeded at displacing them and now were forcing their resettlement into ghettos. Ghettos were packed to the brim with as many individuals as the Nazi's could force into the given area. They were used as a holding place for the forced relocation to concentration and labor camps that awaited Jews in their future.

Concentration camps and labor camps placed Jews in the direst circumstances and most entered without a chance of ever making it back out. Individuals were stripped of their belongings upon arriving and forced to relinquish them as Nazi property. Their clothing, nutrition, accommodations, all now laid at the hands of those that hated them most. Malnutrition

was a prominent factor in the starvation of many. Disease spread like wildfire throughout a community overcome with a lack of opportunity for proper hygiene, intertwined with overcrowded living areas. These inhumane conditions created the perfect environment to eliminate an entire race. The inhabitants that experienced these conditions were subject to extremely low survival rates. If the harsh work that was bestowed upon them to enrich the Nazi efforts did not drive them into an early grave, disease often would. As some survivors exited the Holocaust, their lost memories would derive from the experiences they repressed the most. These traumatic experiences stemmed from everything ranging from losing their businesses and source of income from antisemitism, to losing their loved ones due to the inhumane conditions they were forced to exist in.

While the Nazi's were succeeding at depleting the Jewish population, the official policy of systematic murder of Jews did not begin until 1941, when the Final Solution to the Jewish Question was introduced and initiated. This policy became the final stage of what would conclude the Holocaust and ranged from 1941 to 1945. While there were various ways Jews lives could end during the Holocaust, the most prominent methods of execution consisted of mass shootings throughout towns and asphyxiation at the hand of poison gas being disbursed throughout gas chambers. These two implementations of execution became responsible for the death of two million Jews throughout the course of the Final Solution, leaving the remaining four million to die at the expense of disease, malnutrition, etc.

Over fifteen hundred towns became victims to the mass shooting experience conducted by German units. Initially mass shootings occurred randomly throughout communities. These happened in daylight and anyone in the general area that survived witnessed the entire experience. As time went on the German units began having the Jews dig massive holes prior to

the auxiliary units taking them out execution style. Jewish civilians were not only being murdered; they were tasked with digging their own graves prior to their demise. No man, woman, or child was spared.

Extermination camps also referred to as a death camps began inhabiting Poland in 1941. The transportation of Jews to this final destination was concealed under the alias of resettlement actions, evacuation transports, or deportations. Boxcars on the railway system were used to transport Jews to the death camps that awaited them. The harsh reality is that the train rails would become the resting place of many. Over one hundred individuals were packed into each boxcar. The journey to the camps would last several days and the individuals being transported were victims of the most atrocious inhumane conditions. Jews were required to stand for days inside box cars that had no openings, they were deprived of basic necessities such as but not limited to access to food, water, and even a restroom. These conditions became responsible for the death of many during transport. The railways did not just become the home of those that died of poor hygiene and malnutrition, the boxcars that were executed became part of the body count on the journey to the camps. The goal of the Final Solution was to exterminate the Jewish race. This meant that, one way or another, the goal was for Jews to die. At times, boxcars would be loaded with over a hundred Jews per car and come to a halt on the railway. The door would be open and the moment anyone stepped off for fresh air the guns would go off executing every individual on board. They didn't have to work them to death, they could kill them at their discretion.

Jews that made it to the death camps were analyzed upon arrival. Depending on their present health, their value to the camp was evaluated. Upon arrival, they were asked to strip their clothes and any belongings they still had and were assigned their new jobs where they would

work to death. The alternative was they would strip and be taken immediately to the gas chambers. Whether a gun or poison gas took the life of the individual, their final resting place became the crematorium. Jewish prisoners were tasked at these camps to assist in filtering through the deceased belongings, taking out gold teeth or fillings that held value, and disposing of their fellow prisoners' corpses in the crematorium. Over three million Jews would lose their lives under the conditions at these killing centers.

While Adolf Hitler was the inspiration and initiator behind the Holocaust and the Final Solution of the Jewish race, he would not have been able to accomplish the magnitude that he did had he been acting alone. Nazi's, stormtroopers, Schutzstaffel, Kripo, the Gestapo, and SDs are just some of the many hands that helped move the plan along. This plan was so intertwined in society that even banks and insurance companies helped cover its true intentions. Denouncing Jews became the new normal as individuals profited from their capture. Jewish owned businesses were taken under new ownership, abandoned homes were raided for their possessions, and greed acted as a massive catalyst in the entire process. Friends and colleagues could no longer be trusted as they turned on those closest to them and unmasked their identities to the Nazi authorities.

After twelve years of catastrophic experiences targeted at members of the Jewish race, in May of 1945, the exposure to the Holocaust came to an end. The United States, the Soviet Union and Great Britain all united their force and defeated Germany during World War II. Together they invaded concentration camps and freed all the survivors. As they made their way to the camps they freed survivors that were being forced to complete death marches. Survivors were living to see the day they never thought would come.

The question of how someone could possibly survive the Holocaust has been centerstage during the interview process of survivors. While it is an excellent question, it does not have a single answer. Against all odds some survived the death camps and each one has a different story to tell of what got them through day by day when freedom was never promised. Others escaped prior to World War II and surpassed the immigration barriers. A few even managed to live in German controlled areas with the help of others in the form of providing a safe haven to hide and meals and supplies to get them through each day. Other sympathizers assisted by producing false documentation with Christian religious preference to those attempting to escape the lash of the Germans. Regardless of what path an individual took, what they all share in common is the reality that they survived an experience that was meant to exterminate them permanently.

The emotional trauma that Jewish survivors were exposed to throughout their Holocaust experience left them with the task of having to learn how to process the trials and tribulations they had just faced. The reality of losing their entire lineages, property, belongings, and lives they had built was a weight that no one should ever have to bear. Rebuilding a life was a lot easier said than done when the fear that it could all be taken away again was a extremely prominent worry. The Holocaust ending and freedom being attained did not mean communities were waiting for Jews to come back with open arms and love to spread around. Individuals were displaced, new lives had to be attained and the trauma would never be forgotten. The “soul wounds” Holocaust survivors experienced were responsible for a level of trauma so significant that it would change DNA down to a cellular level in survivors and would affect how they and their offspring processed and recalled stressful experiences for the rest of their lives. This one experience in their life became responsible for intergenerational trauma.

As Holocaust survivors returned to society, they navigated their trauma through two paths. Some processed their emotions internally and chose not to speak about their experience, while others sought after a listening ear as an outlet. As the implementation of survivors using their voice to tell their story began, different approaches were taken to recollect their experience. In the following chapter, we will analyze Dori Laub's tactic on interviewing a Holocaust survivor and bearing witness to their truth.

CHAPTER THREE:

DORI LAUB ON BEARING WITNESS

In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Dori Laub goes over the testimony process that he believes has the ability to assist survivors in filling in the gaps within their memory. He goes on to further explain the ability for the brain to access memories as post traumatic experiences and how, as a trauma response, certain memories can be blocked and require a more strenuous effort to recollect them. The concept of dissociative amnesia is a genetic trauma response that can be passed down genetically across multiple generations. This condition results in individuals that were not direct victims of the Holocaust yet descended from those that were, having a trauma that they cannot identify. In Laub's text he gives instances of scenarios where he directly witnessed this trickle-down effect on the lineage of survivors as he listened to their testimonies. Survivors who had "written and buried diaries in the ground so as to be historically preserved, pictures were taken in secret, messengers and escapees tried to inform and to warn the world of what was taking place"⁴ were now also the same survivors that couldn't recollect portions of their experience.

The ability to discuss an experience may seem like a simple practice, but the reality is, it is far from a uncomplicated or undemanding process. Our mind acts like an encyclopedia of memories that, when compiled, have helped shape us into the people we are today. These

⁴ Laub, Dori. "An Event Without A Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival" Essay. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 75-92. New York, NY: Routledge, 1992.

experiences have assisted in forming and dismantling belief systems, day to day habits, and so much more. When an individual loses a portion of a memory, they also lose a part of themselves. The story they tell themselves feels unfinished, and they seek an ending that they are not sure exists. “Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect.”⁵ By a survivor not being able to distinguish between the reality and what they recollect in their memory they become trapped in a limbo composed of both. In order to heal, victims have an underlying want to recover their memories. As the memories start to trickle back in through the process of retelling their story, they do not appear in a linear fashion. They act like streams of light breaking through any crack that can be found in the surface. These recollections reappear “in disjointed fragments in the memory of the survivor.”⁶ Through the act of testimony, the bits and pieces become connected like a puzzle eventually with the hope of revealing the entire picture and awakening the silence within the survivor.

“A witness is a witness to the truth of what happens during an event.”⁷ The truth can only be set free by eliminating the silence within. Often times the silence a witness has succumbed to has become a repetition of a consistent story. The story had been compiled of identifiable selections of their experience in the Holocaust. The most painful selections are often excluded, whether the exclusion is by choice or unknowingly. Because of this, the silence is not always

⁵ Laub, Dori. “Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening” Essay. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 57-74. New York, NY: Routledge, 1992.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Laub, Dori. “An Event Without A Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival” Essay. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 75-92. New York, NY: Routledge, 1992.

intentional, sometimes it hides subliminally in the background, where the witness is unaware of its presence. While the silence is unknown to some, others make the conscious decision to remain silent. Survivors choosing not to speak approach it as a form of preservation. By choosing to not address the painful memories, they inadvertently choose to not relive them. “If the price of speaking is re-living; not relief, but further retraumatization”⁸, then it is then easier to remain silent than to submerge themselves into the pain. The problem with choosing silence, whether it’s an active choice or one subconsciously made, is that a survivor’s story is lost to silence and time. The peace of a Holocaust survivor is not found in the silence because without the healing provided through speaking their truth, peace cannot be attained. Suppression of the experience does not create the space required for healing. Their identity is lost in the chaos of the silence, their history remaining unknown to those around them. As the silence continues, its effects on an individual’s life and their descendants’ lives strengthen. “The continued power of the silenced memory of genocide as an overriding, structuring and shaping force, may be, however neither truly known by the survivors, nor recognized as representing, in effect, memory of trauma. It finds its way into their lives, unwittingly, through an uncanny repetition of events that duplicate in structure and in impact the traumatic past.”⁹ This repetition as time goes on leaks into the construction of the new lives’ survivors tried to build post Holocaust.

Children of Holocaust survivors live in the shadow of their parents’ trauma. They develop learned behaviors through what they witnessed from their parents growing up. These behaviors can affect aspects of their life going forward based on what was displayed to them in the past. They may learn to “repress and to forget, by acting out and living out the lessons

⁸ Laub, Dori. “Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening” Essay. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 57-74. New York, NY: Routledge, 1992.

⁹ Ibid.

learned.”¹⁰ This repetition is seen through generations as a cycle of transmission. The silence by their parents was learned and accepted by the children. Unknowingly their behaviors became direct representations of the trauma their parents had endured. Their form of processing conflict became altered. Rebuilding after catastrophe almost became expected. “The gaping, vertiginous black hole of the unmentionable years. The silence formed like a heavy wall that weighed down on everyone. Parents explained nothing, children asked nothing.”¹¹ The silence in their families grew louder and all consuming, as it spread across generations and the weight was expected to be beared by all.

The trials and tribulations survivors were exposed to during their Holocaust experience has created a playing field where tragic experiences that happen over a lifetime are not viewed only as tragedies but instead as a second Holocaust. Post Holocaust, survivors worked tirelessly to rebuild their lives. This ranges from financial to emotional. However, “in the center of this massive, dedicated effort remains a danger, a nightmare, a fragility, a soundness that defies all healing”¹² Unlike individuals who have not been subject to the scale of trauma such as that which the Holocaust survivors experienced, these survivors do not feel they possess the luxury of being able to pause. By taking a minute to slow down to process and grieve, they feel defenseless. A pause in their eyes only leaves them more vulnerable than they already are. Instances such as a home burning, a child dying from natural causes, losing their career, and so on are not viewed as just disappointing life experiences. Such experiences dig up the same sensations they felt during their initial Holocaust experience where they lost everything. A second Holocaust for a survivor opens up the wounds that the passage of time has not allowed to

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

heal. “The “second holocaust” thus turns out to be itself a testimony to a history of repetition. Through its uncanny reoccurrence, the trauma of the second holocaust bears witness not just to a history that has not ended, but, specifically, to the historical occurrence of an event that, in effect, does not end.”¹³

When the silence is all consuming, and your voice is the only release, the weight of the pressure to tell your story can seem overwhelming. The experience of being a survivor can be a lonely one. That sentence alone can seem like an oxymoron because of the number of people that survived the Holocaust, meant to eliminate them. While survivors have their experience in common, they do not all necessarily feel like they can speak on it. “Survivors often claim that they experience the feeling of belonging to a “secret order” that is sworn to silence.”¹⁴ Due to this and many additional factors including internal struggles, survivors often felt like there wasn’t a soul they could turn to for recognition. The very inability to have someone to turn to during these life altering experiences “created in this way a world in which one could not bear witness to oneself.”¹⁵ It was intended to be foolproof systematic abolition. No one on the inside felt they could be a witness for themselves, and no one on the outside saw anything that they could bear witness to. There was an invisible shield on the experience and the ones bearing the weight of the shield were the survivors.

When silence overcomes a community of survivors, is there a witness? If a story is not being told, how does a witness come forward? It could be said that because of the way the event unraveled, a witness could not be produced. “It was not only the reality of the situation and the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Laub, Dori. “An Event Without A Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival” Essay. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 75-92. New York, NY: Routledge, 1992.

¹⁵ Ibid.

lack of responsiveness of bystanders or the world that accounts for the fact that history was taking place with no witness: it was also the unthinkable the very notion that a witness could exist.”¹⁶ With entire communities turning their backs as to not be involved, and individuals dying from the atrocities being inflicted upon them, the Holocaust was never meant to have a witness. With time, as the inability to talk became less of a reality, telling their story became a prominent survival mechanism. Hope is an overlooked emotion, that bears a significant amount of weight in this instance. The will to live is awakened when living is the only alternative to the unthinkable that one’s life will end at the hands of another. Survivors entering their roles as witness began to tell their story. “We wanted to survive so as to live one day after Hitler, in order to be able to tell our story.”¹⁷ With these revelations, witnesses were born.

The object of bearing witness could not be fulfilled until after the actual event. Holocaust survivors were treated as subhumans for what seemed like a never ending experience in their reality. This experience went on to shape the rest of their daily lives. Today, survivors consistently search the present for familiarity from the past. This process is done unknowingly to their conscience. Because of this, coupled with the dissociative amnesia as a result of their previous trauma, survivors live in a limbo of their present reality entangled with the past. In order to untangle the limbo a survivor is immersed in, they must re-externalize their experience. “This re-externalization of the event can occur and take effect only when one can articulate and transmit the story, literally transfer it to another outside oneself and then take it back again, inside.”¹⁸ In the process of going through this, the survivor is able to grasp reality once more and

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Laub, Dori. “Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening” Essay. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 57-74. New York, NY: Routledge, 1992.

the evil that haunts their memories can sometimes be diminished, even if only temporarily allowing more truth to rise to the surface. Through this psychoanalytic experience, a survivor can “reclaim both his life and his past.”¹⁹

The process of being a witness to one’s own story can be an overpowering experience. Survivors often come out of the silence feeling alone, and taking the journey of reclaiming the past can feel terrifying. Through the act of testimony a survivor has the ability to not only fill in the gaps of their past and reclaim their present, but also have the comfort of a passenger through their experience. Because “testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to somebody; to somebody they have been waiting for, for a long time.”²⁰ The role of the listener is not to give input but instead to go on the journey with the testifier. By creating a safe space during the duration of the process, the listener is essentially saying, “for this limited time, throughout the duration of the testimony, I’ll be with you all the way, as much as I can. I want to go wherever you go, and I’ll hold and protect you along this journey. Then, at the end of the journey, I shall leave you.”²¹ This gentle act creates the atmosphere where the gaping holes in a survivor’s recollection can be filled and the full picture be revealed.

When a survivor begins to remember pieces they weren’t aware existed within their mind, they often seek solitude. This solitude however does not mean they wish to be entirely alone. The presence of another in their space while welcomed, does not need to make their presence evident. The testifier must feel that you are emotionally invested in their experience in order to not shut themselves down entirely. Because “the survivor knows he is being heard, he

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

will stop to hear and listen to himself.”²² By this reflection enabling them to be aware of the forgotten memory, additional pieces may rise to surface, creating “further links in the testimonial chain.”²³ If that is lost, their testimony will come to a halt.

A widely misconstrued idea is that silence provides peace. For decades survivors remained silent in hopes that they could return to what they believe is their normal. A life before the Holocaust. By not speaking they thought they wouldn’t have to relive their worst nightmares. The reality is that the longer a survivor remains silent regarding their story the more of it leaks into their daily life. Their experience becomes an unrecognizable memory. “The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor’s concept of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events.”²⁴ As a survivor loses sight of their story, their self-perception can often be clouded as well. Through this, a survivor “fails to be an authentic witness to themselves. This collapse of witnessing is precisely, what is central to the Holocaust experience.”²⁵

In Laub’s depiction of the process of testimony, the role of the listener is just as important as that of the witness. An individual fulfilling the role of a listener during this interaction must submerge his/herself to feel all the trials and tribulations and rollercoaster of emotions that the witness is depicting. Only then can an assumption of testimony be reached. Throughout the interaction between the witness and the listener, the silence a witness is consumed with must be respected by the individual acting as the listener in testimony.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Laub, Dori. “An Event Without A Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival” Essay. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 75-92. New York, NY: Routledge, 1992.

²⁵ Ibid.

The trauma survivor who is bearing witness has no prior knowledge, no comprehension and no memory of what happened. That he or she profoundly fears such knowledge, shrinks away from it and is apt to close off at any moment, when facing it. He needs to know that such knowledge dissolves all barriers, breaks all boundaries of time and place, of self and subjectivity. That the speakers about trauma on some level prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear or being listened to and of listening to themselves. That while silence is defeat, it serves them both as a sanctuary and as a place of bondage. Silence is for them a fated exile, yet also a home, a destination, and a binding oath.²⁶

Through the relationship of the listener and the witness recollecting the story in the singular act of testimony, the pieces begin to connect and the curtain the silence hides behind begins to be opened. This interaction creates the space for the individual to come to tell their story, their trauma becoming revealed helps them come to understand the event that took place. The silence that the individual had held on to for so long became a prominent aspect of the historical occurrence he/she was a witness to. Only through the act of testimony can such a release be accomplished.

A testimony acts as a mirror a survivor can look into. This mirror shows them everything that the mask of silence had once hid. The experience of going through with a testimony forces the survivor to face their loss. The pain they endured becomes prominent. The separation they withstood can no longer be ignored. "It reenacts the passage through difference in such a way, however, that it allows perhaps a certain repossession of it."²⁷ A survivor is incapable of

²⁶ Laub, Dori. "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening" Essay. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 57-74. New York, NY: Routledge, 1992.

²⁷ Laub, Dori. "An Event Without A Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival" Essay. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 75-92. New York, NY: Routledge, 1992.

repossessing his/her life if a testimony is never constructed and delivered. The action is what sets the motion for the liberation that is birthed after the survival is surpassed. “The event must be reclaimed because even if successfully repressed, it nevertheless invariably plays a decisive formative role in who one comes to be, and in how one comes to live one’s life.”²⁸ Through the act of providing their testimony, harsh realizations become evident for survivors. They cannot bring their lost ones back. They realize “that what life is all about is precisely living with an unfulfilled hope; only this time with the sense that you are not alone any longer.”²⁹ By sharing their story, they gain a companion. This individual essentially says, “I’ll be with you in the very process of your losing me. I am your witness.”³⁰

Laub spends two chapters in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* discussing the process of how the relationship between a witness and a listener can fill in the gaps of a survivor’s story through the act of having a partner there for you as you give testimony. The process of revisiting the experience in a partnership assists in providing clarity to the existence of a survivor. “There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one’s story, unimpeded baby ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life.”³¹ The act of going through testimony and finding ones lost self provides individuals with the ability to fill in the apertures in their recollections and uncover who they were and who they’ve become. According to Laub, “when one’s history is abolished, one’s identity ceases to exist as well.”³² Through the process of a continuous conversation, a life can be reclaimed and

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

history can become revealed. In the subsequent chapter, I will consider the method of a continuous conversation in the relationship of an interviewer and interviewee through the lens of Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors Beyond Testimony*.

CHAPTER FOUR:
HENRY GREENSPAN ON LISTENING TO HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS BEYOND
TESTIMONY

“I just wanted to survive. Just to live through. Mostly, maybe it was revenge or something. I don’t know what it was. But, uh, it kept me going.”³³ So often, Holocaust survivors are probed during a first interview and what everyone wants to know is how did they do it? How did they survive? In *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors Beyond Testimony*, Henry Greenspan dissects this type of interview process and articulates why this approach is leaving listeners with a watered down version of the Holocaust experience. This version of an individual’s story is then accepted as the full picture and leaves portions of the story untold. He goes on to justify why having a continuous conversation over multiple meetings with a survivor is the approach that should be adopted universally in comparison to a single interview. Through the book, he takes us on a journey with multiple survivors as examples of how taking this approach has made a world of a difference in his research.

While it can be argued that the Holocaust is a one-time occurrence in history, it cannot be stated that this makes it irrelevant to our future. The Holocaust experience cannot simply dissipate with the death of its survivors, the effects of this go much deeper than just those directly involved. When talking about how the Holocaust experience has penetrated individuals aside from just the survivors, the children of these survivors need to be accounted for. When

³³ Greenspan, Henry. *On listening to holocaust survivors: Beyond testimony*. St. Paul,, MN: Paragon House, 2010.

children of Holocaust survivors have been addressed, “their knowledge of the Holocaust is not a checklist of symptoms, they each insist, the Holocaust is a part of me, part of my everyday life, part of my history.”³⁴ This historical event has set in motion the track of their lives, and they weren’t even there.

What is a survivor? What attributes compose a Holocaust survivor in totality? It could be said that they are an “elective critic, a lost soul, a proud dramatist, a young witness, an outspoken challenger, a modest diarist.”³⁵ Regardless of the title they bear, they are haunted by a past that requires a voice. These explanations can be full of haunting suggestions or restrained by pain. They can be guided by a fearful future or lost within the past. They can be full of the gratitude of God, or question their entire existence. Regardless of which aspects compose each survivors’ truth, each one struggles to share their experience while attempting to not be consumed by their story.

A survivor reenters our realm of existence through retelling their story. The death they are so constantly consumed by sits in the back seat as they enter the living with us as their listeners. When the listener and recounter relationship is portrayed correctly, the survivor should no longer feel alone on their journey. As listeners in a continuous conversation, we allow the recounter to excavate their story and uncover what lies beneath the constructed story line. Through this journey, they uncover “there are corpses beneath the stories, other stories beneath the stories.”³⁶ However as we go on this journey with the recounter, the listener must remain aware that beyond what is excavated, there will always be more that may never be uncovered.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

When an experience is being described, it can seem like it's "a recounting that has a mind and a memory of its own."³⁷ This is because the story has been told so many times prior that the recounter has learned what the listener is not only expecting to hear but what they are comfortable being exposed to. Experiences are not stories. They need to be transformed into stories in order to be shared with others. When doing this, almost always, the recounter has to compromise with what they are willing and not willing to share with us. These compromises of what is not shared live in what we call a "landscape of death- a simultaneity of terrors in which not only stories but even sound was out of place, an enclosing nightmare in which even screams were silenced."³⁸

As a listener, we need to understand that when a recounter is telling us their story it is always a personalized experience. Through the layers of trauma that constitute a survivor, years of normal experiences have also assisted in the composition of the individual a listener sees before them. "But this kind of structuring is also a "compromise"-it is always a failed compromise. Meanings that are salvaged are eventually reduced again; analogies are introduced and then negated and abandoned; stories are cut short or are insistently repeated."³⁹

When survivors came out of the Holocaust, they were often told to suppress their stories by the individuals in the societies they were reentering. Individuals did not want to hear about the atrocities that occurred, they felt that if they closed their ears off, they weren't involved. As time went on, traction grew to want to hear the stories individuals had to tell. By this point, it seemed that survivors did not want to speak, when in reality, they had just been trained for so long to

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

remain silent that speaking felt foreign. The reality is that “recounting as the primary impulse, is an elementary need.”⁴⁰

“Some participants appear to have hidden their questions with answers; others to have muffled their answers with questions.”⁴¹ Survivors being the participants referenced in the exchange of an interview did not all have the same approach. Regardless of the tactic, the compromise has been made in consideration of the listener, once more placing the weight of the untold nightmares solely on the recounter to carry. Their story becomes merely echoes of the screams they suppress.

As we enter the realm of interviewing a survivor, it is important to note that we aren’t just there to collect raw data to turn around and cook it into a condensed version of what we can digest. Instead, the process of “an interview is itself really cooking, much of the interpreting takes place within the conversation.”⁴² This interaction works seamlessly amongst interviewers and interviewees that are able to engage easily with one another. Through engagement, the conversation leads to an interchange of questions that both parties feel comfortable exploring. Both parties act like a partner in conversation, bouncing off one another through the journey of the discussion. This can most easily be achieved through the process of a continuous conversation.

Being a Holocaust survivor came at a cost. This not only carries a physical but also an emotional and mental toll. The survivor guilt that weighs on a Holocaust survivor becomes a part of their identity. “The best of us did not survive.”⁴³ It melts into their being and becomes an

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Frankl, Viktor E., Helen Pisano, Ilse Lasch, Harold S. Kushner, and William J. Winslade. *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Boston,, MA: Beacon Press, 2014.

integral part of who they are. The weight they bare that “one’s life came at the cost of others’ deaths, that one might have done more to help or to resist- is despair on an entirely different level.”⁴⁴ This experience not only affects the individual but also transforms the way they view the world they coexist in. The destruction they have witnessed is irrevocable and bears betrayal that cannot be ignored, as the shame weighs down heavier on the survivor.

“Through guilt, survivors reestablish continuity with non-Holocaust memories.”⁴⁵ The guilt carried by each survivor stemmed from their loss. The loss of their loved ones made them feel shame for various reasons. These consisted of but were not limited to having survived while others had not, and wondering what more they could have done to alter that result. The guilt not only has meaning but assists in the recounting of an individual’s Holocaust experience while merging in memories that correlate with other aspects of their life. Because of the guilt carried by the survivor, it could be said that this guilt acts as a catalyst to push the individual to share their experience. Because others have been silenced by death, the responsibility to tell the story lies on them instead. “For survivors, finding listeners is the issue. They do not search for form and meaning for the sake of form and meaning. They do so in hope of being heard. And without some faith in that possibility, survivors do not recount at all.”⁴⁶

The private nightmares that survivors cling to are silenced from their stories through two avenues. “First the nightmare itself strangles speech; even screams are silenced. Second, beyond a few iconic images ritually repeated, and a few contexts of recounting that are themselves highly ritualized, the horror is relived in isolation.”⁴⁷ The pain these individuals carry silently

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

daily can be all consuming if they allow it. Through the act of pulling down the shade, they attempt to protect themselves from their inevitable reality.

When it came to designing the process of listening beyond testimony through a continuous conversation, the very concept of meeting multiple times came from the survivors. This concept of a collaborative interview creates the atmosphere for the conversation to surpass the limits of questions simply seeking answers. It creates the space for what is a real interview which consists of two parties committed to uncovering the whole story. While it can be said that the whole story may never reach the surface, “partners in conversation proceed as far as they choose or are able to.”⁴⁸ Both individuals are fully in the process.

Because interviewees know they will be back, the pressure to regurgitate a digestible story is removed. It creates a space where it is okay if a question was not addressed or a detail is forgotten, because they can circle back to it during their next interaction. Reflections come naturally, versus in a one-time interview, where the recounter is pulling from a stored story that they have created to address predetermined questions. Nothing is guaranteed to come out of this interaction, but because the destination is not predetermined, both parties go on the journey together. This process deters from the first interview expectation of proven responses to common questions and instead paints the entire picture. The picture that doesn’t just include the trauma from their stored stories, but the one that also shows us their experiences that came from love and yearning that can so easily be diminished and forgotten.

Through the act of a continuous conversation, we avoid getting the usual spiel from a survivor. “Retelling sounds less like “testimony” and more like the questions and reflections of a

⁴⁸ Ibid.

particular person, shared with another particular person, in conversation together.”⁴⁹ The lives beyond the Holocaust that survivors experienced become relevant in this interaction where they are often ignored in a first interview scenario. Post-Holocaust life plays an immense role because “it is simply not possible to understand survivors’ accounts of what happened during the destruction if we do not also know a good deal about the rest of who they are and what they have lived.”⁵⁰ These details of their life emerge through natural conversation in the dialect of a sustained conversation. A survivors whole life becomes center stage instead of only a portion that highlights their Holocaust experience. The memories that otherwise would have been forgotten are born through continuous conversation. The conversation creates the spark for them to rise to the surface. “The objectivity to which survey research once aspired has turned out to be chimerical, both in practice and in theory.”⁵¹

As time has gone on, research has shown that first interview outcomes stand on a very unstable base. In order to understand an entire account, the before and the after are important pieces of information. This information helps show the development through time and the effects the Holocaust had on a given individual. Continuous conversation tries to stray from the predetermined expectations survivors have about what is hearable to the audience based on their prior experiences. With this invisible barbed wire removed, more of the survivor’s self is brought into the story they tell. Through changing the approach of the conversation, we work in reinventing testimony as a whole. “The traditional research narrative posits the scholar as independent knower, following some prescribed method, and moving through a sea of data to capture conclusions- a “voyage of discovery” in the heroic mold. But if the “data” are the

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

knowers, and the method is one of collaborative conversation, the process is not about making “order out of chaos” but rather coming implicated in what is already an ordered web of conversations.”⁵² As the survivor is approached for their story, the factor that the story did in fact happen to someone remains in the forefront of a continuous conversation. Instead of doing research on survivors, we are researching with them. “We’re learning together.”⁵³

The act of having multiple conversations with a single individual opens doors that would have otherwise remained closed in a single conversation. “In general, first interviews tend to evoke versions of experience that are “proven” ones we already know are tellable by us and hearable by our listeners.”⁵⁴ A listener whether knowingly or not typically presumes what a recounter is going to say before the words have been uttered. This can alter the way the story being given is accepted. When as listeners we devote our time to the collection of individual stories in single interviews, we fail at getting the actual story by focusing on collecting by the thousand. This interviewing approach can be witnessed through the work of Laub in Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History. The act of testimony alone does not bring us any closer to understanding the experience of the Holocaust. Freezing the words of the experience of another cannot make us feel what they felt, see what they saw, or place us in their shoes.

The listener in a single interview interaction due to lack of immersion into the experience being recollected tends to accept whatever condensed and compromised version of the story is reiterated to them by the recounter. This single acceptance makes it where the recounter realizes that their pain will forever remain theirs. That their struggles cannot be accepted or

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

comprehended by the world around them. That those listening, are not listening for the full story but are willing to digest instead a cookie cutter version that has been mass shared through copious amounts of single time interviews. This single interaction does nothing but solidify for the recounter that a “survivors’ guilt remains their problem, not ours.”⁵⁵ Because as listeners we are hearing what we anticipated, we lack the ability to be open to hearing more. We take the portion of the story the recounter gave us and accept it as the whole. “We mistake the made story for the full story, the tragedy recounted for the atrocity endured.”⁵⁶

Celebratory discourse guides the process of testimony. This causes one-time interviews to lack the details that emerge through a continuous conversation because, in a single interview, as emotions begin to rise to the surface, they can be taken as “diagnostic information rather than as an invitation for further discussion.”⁵⁷ As the listener, we have a responsibility to create an atmosphere where a recounter feels comfortable enough to speak their truth verses suppress it behind a condensed story. Instead of pursuing the story with a motive of confirming what is already known, as listeners we need to approach a recounter with the sole purpose of listening as the motive. Through the process of having a sustained conversation, we act as the outlet where survivors can seek healing and face their trauma as they give us their testimonies and share their legacy. We enter a world of “knowing with survivors, in contrast with “knowing from” or “knowing about” them.”⁵⁸

As a recounter retells their story, they are giving it important details such as “identified actors, a specific place and time, and a coherent unfolding of action, reaction, and

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

development.”⁵⁹ Through this the experience is given form. The problem with a story being told once in a single interview in this type of format is that it becomes a rehearsed experience. The recounter already knows what to say because he or she feels they know what the listener wants to hear. This cycle can only be broken through the process of having a continuing conversation that develops a relationship between the listener and the recounter over time. Through the trust that is birthed in this process, we as listeners gain pieces of information we would have never otherwise been privileged to, and the recounter gains perspective to experiences that had been previously lost in other parts of their mind.

“You don’t want to get into it to a deepness that you feel you cannot get out.”⁶⁰ Often times survivors hide behind a familiar story they can retell because it allows them to remain with the shade pulled down. The shade acts as a security barrier between the recounter experiences and what they are comfortable exposing. “How much death can be revealed and the story itself survive.”⁶¹ Because of the magnitude of the size of the Holocaust experience, only so much death can be revealed without it entirely consuming the recounter. A thin line is walked between what can be recounted and what remains a hidden nightmare.

“Survivors recounting now emerges within a double transaction: an inner dialogue, always embattled, between survivors’ speech and survivors’ memories, and an outer dialogue, almost as contested between survivors and their listeners.”⁶² As a survivor becomes a recounter, the way their story transpires relies a lot on the perception they have of the individual playing the role of

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

the listener. The story transforms into what the recounter believes is hearable by the listener and holds less of the weight of the entire story.

“A story from lived experiences marks the boundaries of a journey.”⁶³ As an individual opens up about their story, while at times it may seem scattered, bits and pieces rise to the surface through continuous conversations, and the story itself will never wander aimlessly. There will always be a direction to the story being depicted. “You have to live it through, back again. You have to concentrate, and go back in again.”⁶⁴ Only through this submersion can the destruction of an entire people even attempt to reach the surface of an individual’s story. As a survivor turns their experience into a story, they are turning a nightmare without shape into something with form that can be conveyed to the listener. These stories are created from memories that remain prominent despite their origins. The prominent memories create the limits of the journey by acting as perimeters in their scope of knowledge and operating as their boundaries.

For a story to be understood by a listener, it needs to be composed of experiences. These experiences transform the story into a coherent recount that another can understand and process. “Stories humanize fate; their retelling internalizes and humanizes stories; their recounter finds and externalizes his own story in the stories of others his own story; as a storyteller, becomes itself the story of all our efforts to humanize fate- to salvage stories, rescue prayers and faces, from fate and death.”⁶⁵ The need to humanize fate stems from the want to create human terms to the story “For some survivors, the attempt to find “human terms” for memory involves more than

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

stories that are told. It also involves stories that are lived; enactments of personal guilt or rage that use, as their media, the contents and contexts of survivors ongoing lives themselves.”⁶⁶

The magnitude of the Holocaust remains difficult to authentically grasp because of the scale. It is often said that due to this, “the truth will never be written.”⁶⁷ A story being told to a listening ear speaks volumes in comparison to text on a page. Emotions are tied to words that are spoken. More can be absorbed through this interpersonal interaction amongst a listener and a recounter than an individual reading a page. For this reason and many more, survivors continue to retell their stories and give them shape. What needs to be understood is that without the process of the conversation continuing, the story will always remain unfinished. “A survivor’s job is to talk about the Holocaust: to be witnesses or testifiers or passers-on of legacies. Our job by contrast, is to talk about survivors- either as heroic people who have such a task to fulfill or as haunted victims of the destruction.”⁶⁸

While survivors have adapted with time to the world around them, it can never be considered a full adaptation because there is eternally an “invisible barbed wire”⁶⁹ that holds them back. Their survival story is romanticized. They are asked to speak in front of others with parameters that are set in place to make the listeners/audience more comfortable. This sets the motion for the entire story never to be heard. They are painted as heroes that overcame what seemed impossible through a heroic experience. When in reality these individuals do not feel like they bear capes. They would instead state “we are not heroes. We survived by some fluke that we do not ourselves understand.”⁷⁰ Bearing the title of survivor in the 70’s began to be

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

considered a fashion. They were idolized, when in reality this experience should have never been romanticized. A survivor should have never felt they had to bear the weight of portraying their story as a joyous moment of overcoming atrocities and coming out victorious. The reality is a Holocaust survivor emerged from the ashes and the flames that had been designed to consume them. They lost not only a part of themselves, but entire legacies in the process. They needed to be seen as survivors not heroes because it was not their job to alter their title to make their story more digestible to the public. The act of listening to praise turns into listening “specifically to be acclaimed instead of being listened to.”⁷¹ This turns the process of testimony to be a listener driven effort verses a recounter centrally driven mission.

Looking back, Greenspan considered the possibilities that there were no survivors. He thought “could it be, that no one survived? It would be years before I realized that the answer was yes and no- simultaneously, irreducibly.”⁷² We cannot focus on the fact that the survivors are dying to justify not addressing their stories properly and giving them the sufficient attention they deserve. The argument that the survivors are dying is used today just as often as it was in the 70’s. Using this approach when collecting their stories only turns their story into last words. Their stories cannot be last words because their words will live on through the trickle effect of their generations to come.

No words are adequate to acquaint the people with the reality of the Holocaust....there will never be anything definitive about it. It is only as we learn to follow survivors accounts as they become disfigured and finally fail- because the destruction is too vast, because loss is too unbearable, because meaning becomes undone, because stories fall

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

apart, because voices start to strangle, because death again invades the recounter- that we begin to approach the Holocaust itself.⁷³

⁷³ Ibid.

CHAPTER 5:

DIMENSIONS IN TESTIMONY WITH HELEN KAHAN

I was brought on to The Florida Holocaust Museum team as a marketing intern. In the beginning, I felt like that is exactly what I was. I handled almost all their posts on their website and social media platforms as well as being in charge of posting all of the upcoming museum events across different news platforms. One day, I was sitting at my desk typing up a post for Instagram when Tammy, my boss, walked in to my office and proclaimed, “Chad needs help with transcribing interviews for the new exhibit we have opening. Is this something that you would feel comfortable doing? You will literally be a part of history as you will be entering this data into the Shenandoah Jewish Foundation software.” I could not contain my excitement. This was literally the ideal example of what I wanted to be a part of. Confidently I responded “Absolutely!” The next thirty minutes were spent showing me around the website that I would be using to watch the interviews and where I needed to type the responses. The work I was typing would then be used to create the subtitles on the screen while each survivor is stating their response to the question that they had been asked. The entire process of transcribing was relatively easy, however the stories that I listened to for hours were an entirely different scenario. The stories that I would be exposed to would be incalculably heart breaking.

Throughout my time interning at The Florida Holocaust Museum as a transcriber for the Dimensions in Testimony exhibit, I became acquainted with the experiences of Mary Wygodski, Edward Herman, Betty Grebenschikoff, and Helen Kahan. Each individual had a different story

to tell, and while their recollections took me down different paths, there was one thing they all had in common. They were survivors. Some went into hiding, some had their family members smuggle them out of the country, others had to withstand multiple concentration camps prior to escaping, and the list goes on. Mary, Edward, and Betty's interviews had almost been fully transcribed already by the time I had been assigned this task. I finished up their interviews and then moved on to Helen's. I think part of the reason I felt such a connection to Helen's story is because she is the only individual out of the four that were interviewed that I transcribed from beginning to end. I listened to her entire experience and was able to paint the entire picture her words formed. I witnessed as she moved her blouse to unveil the number she had been branded with at Auschwitz, I stared as I saw the anger during certain memories flash before her eyes. At a hundred years old she could still remember so much detail. There was one particular memory of hers that stuck out to me. I rewatched her tell that specific memory multiple times as I had to rewind it because I did not want to miss a single detail. Throughout her interview, Helen reminisced on a time that she had been assigned to help build roads. Her wrists felt weak from moving bricks back and forth and she needed to buy herself time. I remember wondering how time would be of any benefit. Helen continued to explain that time provided her body with the ability to strengthen her wrists, because if her wrists failed her, she was without a doubt going to be sent to the crematorium when they lined her up in the morning for appellplatz. Weakness was not an attribute that one could afford during the Holocaust. If you appeared weak, then you weren't needed. Helen described how she saved three days of her and her sister's daily bread rationing to trade for a needle and salt. A needle and salt? I wondered, how can a needle and salt save you during the Holocaust? How can a needle and salt buy you time? This is the part that I kept rewinding. Helen told us that she traded the bread for those items in order to make it look

like she had a rash. Not a rash so detrimental that she would be sentenced to death, but urgent enough that it would buy her a couple days in the infirmary. Helen used the needle to poke her chest in multiple spots and then rubbed the salt on it to create irritation. This act simply blew my mind. I couldn't think of a time when I would have ever been able to come up with that idea in order to keep myself alive. Helen's interview was the highlight of my internship experience. For 11 weeks I spent hours dissecting and piecing her words together. She taught me more than she can possibly imagine, and solidified my interest in continuing to pursue studying the Holocaust and the memoirs that were birthed from that experience.

Throughout the 11 weeks that I spent transcribing Helen's interview, I learned a vast amount about the woman she had been, the woman the Holocaust turned her into, and how that adapted post Holocaust. Helen went to multiple concentration camps before ever being released. Through the trials and tribulations she faced during the Holocaust, she ended up losing her family. The pain she experienced was especially visible when she discussed the death of her little sister. She felt responsible for that one. As if she could have protected her more, maybe, just maybe, her sister would have made it out of there like she did. During especially painful memories that Helen relived through the discussion, I noticed a common denominator. As Helen would approach details of an experience pertaining to her sister, you could see her mind drifting from the conversation. It was like a curtain would be drawn in her mind when the memory became too painful. She would often look away and say she couldn't remember. These pieces of the clips would not be included in the final product of the exhibit because they did not consist of a clear answer to a question, but this raw footage assisted in me uncovering the problem that I would witness as dissociative amnesia amongst Holocaust survivors.

Helen was interviewed over the course of multiple meetings. She was asked to return daily over the course of over 5 different sessions. In these sessions her Holocaust experience was discussed in a conversation style. At times questions would be interjected and answers would be recorded. During the numerous hours I watched her interview sessions in order to transcribe them, something became apparent. As painful memories came to the surface, there were times that Helen would state she could not remember a portion of the event she was discussing. As the days went on, the interviewer would circle back to those areas of the conversation in a seamless discussion. While it was not the result of every single memory, there were times where she would remember bits and pieces of what she couldn't recollect 5 sessions prior. This act of a continuous conversation was jogging her brain to find the missing pieces in the story. Sometimes, as the conversation continued into other topics regarding her experience, she would ask to circle back to a prior question because she now had more to add to her answer. It was almost like, as she was getting more comfortable with the process, the pressure of needing to throw out every detail dwindled, which, in retrospect, helped her fill in pieces. It was as if when a memory became clearer, the spark in her eyes returned.

Greenspan approaches the act of interviewing a Holocaust survivor as a continuous conversation. He believes that through this process an interviewer has the opportunity to uncover more of the full story than he or she ever would during a single interview. I feel like through my experience transcribing Helen's testimony for The Florida Holocaust Museum, I had the immense opportunity to watch this firsthand. It was astounding to watch a survivor struggle with a piece of their story that they could not previously recollect as it rose to the surface. It was as if the curtains were being pulled open when they had otherwise been drawn shut in exchange for self-preservation. While, as the audience member, a lot of knowledge can be gained listening to

Helen's testimony, I feel like Helen learned a lot about herself going through the process of giving testimony. Although every memory may not have been pieced together, there definitely were gaps that once existed that she was able to fill in. I truly believe this would not have occurred if the process had been a single interview. The idea of having a continuous conversation made the act of testimony less like an interrogation and more of a discussion.

Today, when you walk into The Florida Holocaust Museum, you will find a vast array of artifacts throughout the first floor. Once you make your way through the first floor to the second floor and walk past the paintings to the back right corner, there tucked away from the crowds you can experience the Dimensions in Testimony exhibit yourself. You will walk into a room that is lined with chairs, has a podium with a microphone in the center, and a vertical rectangle tv screen against the back wall. At the podium you can ask a question of your choice to the survivor that is being projected on the tv screen. When the exhibit went live for the first time, I remember walking to that podium and saying "tell me about a time you took matters into your own hands to survive during the Holocaust". Helen appeared on the screen and told me the story about the bread, the needle, and the salt. A story that I had heard many times before as I transcribed her memories day after day in my office, but today it sounded different. Her story, while bigger than me, made me feel like I was a part of it. By being able to transcribe her memories I felt like I was part of something larger than myself. As individuals enter the relationship of interviewer and interviewee, they must keep in mind that there is always something new to learn, you just have to be willing to listen. The longer you listen, the more you can uncover. Survivors do not find peace in their silence, "this imperative to tell and to be heard can become itself an all-consuming life task. There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully

captured in thought, memory, and speech.”⁷⁴ By bearing witness through the act of continuous conversation, as listeners we create the space where a survivor can rekindle the memory of what was once lost in consciousness. Only through this process can we attempt to help them close the gaps within their story and come fully into who they’ve become.

⁷⁴ Laub, Dori. “Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening” Essay. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, 57-74. New York, NY: Routledge, 1992.

CHAPTER 6:

CONCLUSION

The mental trauma that Holocaust survivors within the Jewish community developed post Holocaust, due to what they were exposed to, has directly affected their ability to remember parts of their experience. Over time, this has affected the generations in their bloodline by altering stress response markers in their DNA and by unconsciously affecting behavioral patterns from parent to offspring. As a response to the mental trauma Holocaust survivors experienced, the portions of their memory most affected can be witnessed in the gaps that arise when storytelling or narrating their experience. In order to consider how these gaps are addressed, I reviewed the work of Laub and Greenspan.

Laub focused on a survivor's inability to have someone as their witness to their story and the effects this had on a Holocaust survivor. He went on to explain how this could be tackled through testimony. Laub's approach is seminal in the scholarship of interviewing Holocaust survivors by depicting the relationship that transpires between an interviewer and an interviewee in a single interview. Greenspan took his research a step further and depicted what happens when an individual is interviewed through a continuous conversation over multiple sessions. He gave examples of how gaps were filled in a storyline by creating a space where all the information did not need to be provided in one sitting. This approach is what I witnessed with Helen for the Dimensions in Testimony exhibit at The Florida Holocaust Museum.

I selected these two approaches to be considered in my research because they represented two distinctive methodologies to address the apertures in recollections plaguing Holocaust

survivors. Using Laub and Greenspan's perspectives to enhance the way I witnessed the Dimensions in Testimony exhibit interviews that I was a part of, I've come to the decision that Greenspan's belief of having an ongoing conversation would be most advantageous when addressing dissociative amnesia as a mental trauma response. Greenspan's concept that you remember things only as you tell them in repetition provides a concrete way of addressing dissociative amnesia amongst the population composed of Holocaust survivors.

The Holocaust is not going to simply go away as the survivors die off. These individuals were victims of the worst that humanity is capable of. While housed in the ghettos, labor camps, concentration camps, etc. inhabitants were susceptible to the most horrific of experiences, including but not limited to: poor nutrition, lack of access to proper hygiene, assault, forced labor, poison gas, mediocre medical care, castration, lice infestation, etc. The mental toll the Holocaust left on the Jewish community can not only be witnessed in the survivors, but also in the generations to follow. This problem does not end with a single generation and demands attention.

These mental traumas portray themselves differently across survivors, as well as generation 1 (direct survivors of the Holocaust), generation 2 (children of direct survivors of the Holocaust), and generation 3 (grandchildren of direct survivors of the Holocaust). Such trauma affects the Jewish community in multiple layers ranging from their day-to-day activities, to how they interact with their society. While they all can have ranging affects, they all have a common origin and that is the apertures in the recollections of Holocaust survivors that stemmed from the trauma they were exposed to.

As I look towards the future, while reflecting on Greenspan's methodology of using a continuous conversation with Holocaust survivors, I believe adding structure could enhance the

overall experience. After my transcribing opportunity with Helen Kahan, and noticing Greenspan's approach in action, I believe adding semi structure to this open conversation approach would be beneficial. Further research on the effects of semi structured interviews while interviewing trauma survivors could result in enriching the current process, and become an instrumental adaptation. While maintaining the approach of a continuous conversation, and adding parameters of the section of the experience being addressed, this would act as a guide in conversation. I believe this approach would create the atmosphere for not just Holocaust survivors, but trauma survivors in general to reach deeper levels of understanding in their story.

“Massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, malfunction.”⁷⁵ Through the act of continuous conversation we hope to help fill the gaps that these survivors are consumed by and assist them in not only understanding themselves, but assisting the generations that follow them in having a broader understand of their own existence. “Never fully waking up is not the same as not waking up at all.”⁷⁶ Today, we choose to wake up.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Greenspan, Henry. *On listening to holocaust survivors: Beyond testimony*. St. Paul,, MN: Paragon House, 2010.

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