

Using Survivor Testimony - to teach about the Holocaust & to connect these lessons to today

Submitted by Suzanne Bottelli, The Northwest School, Seattle

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As Holocaust survivor George Topas puts it, the Holocaust “may never be seen in its full enormity, but its composite images may be fitted together like fragments of a mosaic from the testimonies of eyewitnesses.” (*The Iron Furnace: A Holocaust Survivor’s Story*. Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky, 1990) Consider the ways in which these personal testimonies can be fitted together by your students to shed light on the larger themes of terror and betrayal, as well as solidarity and survival, that give shape to the terrible history of the Holocaust. Finally, discuss the human dimension these testimonies add to the overwhelming and chilling historical record.

For Students in Grades 9-12+:

View the testimonies in their entirety together in class or have students view them ahead of class for homework. Take time to process any questions that arise from the videos (depending on how much of the history you have covered in advance), and then break the class into smaller groups. Have each group review the videos again (in class if possible, or out of class if equipment is limited) to look for threads that connect all three testimonies, noting direct quotations and specific visual images that are evoked by the words of these survivors. Possible choices might include:

- specific experiences of being socially marginalized or ostracized
- particular moments related to the reality of deportation
- actions in defiance of the Nazi soldiers or Nazi authorities
- family unity in the face of Nazi discrimination and destruction
- friendships forged in the midst of dehumanization and danger
- moments of luck that made a difference between life and death

Have each group put together a presentation for the class on one theme, creating a visual aid, or an oral collage in multiple voices, based on the actual text and content of the testimonies.

For an extension activity, have students write on the question of what place Oral History and eyewitness testimony should have in keeping a valid historical record. What is gained by adding the many individual stories of survivors (and perpetrators) to the vast store of other information that has been collected? What is important to consider in collecting such testimonies?

For Students in Grades 5-8:

Introduce the biographies for Peter Metzelaar and Freida Soury as a way into talking about the broad events of the Holocaust and the way it proceeded in stages that started with bullying and exclusion and progressed to deportation and murder. Then show selected video clips from these survivors, in pairings that highlight the sequence of marginalization followed by deportation (or being forced into hiding): Peter M. (video 1 and video 2) then Frieda S. (video 1 and video 2). Ask students to review the specific references in the clips that stand out to them as examples of what it was like to be terrorized and intimidated first, then what it was like to be forced to leave home. For an extended unit, pass out and read (as a whole or in excerpts) Elie Wiesel's *Night*.

Show clips from Peter M. (video 3) and Frieda S. (video 3) to launch a discussion of how each of their mothers showed strength in the face of profound danger and fear. Ask the students to share what they know of other examples (in history or in their own lives) when parents or other family members offered support and strength to hold a family together or to keep a child safe.

For an extension activity, have students write a profile or draw a portrait of a family member who is important to them because of support they have offered at some point in that student's life.