



VANCOUVER HOLOCAUST EDUCATION CENTRE

## Preparing Students For A Holocaust Survivor Speaker

*As a survivor I am aware of my own mortality. As we warily step through the minefields of our memory, some of us are choosing to recall, some are still trying to forget. When we are gone who will do the telling, bear the unbearable, make the unreal real?*

- Eric S., Holocaust survivor

We often use the term testimony to describe the personal account of a Holocaust survivor. Testimony is given as an act of witness and a form of evidence. Testimony implies a valid or “historic truth.” We do not use the term “story” because it implies a fictionalized or constructed account. The Holocaust is an event that has compelled many of those who experienced it to assume the role of witness to the criminal events for which there were few trials or convictions.

Survivors’ Holocaust testimonies are part of their larger oral history, life stories that extend before and after the dislocation of the Holocaust. These larger oral histories attest to a destroyed way of life and a loss of communities and cultures. In recounting their experiences, survivors remember their past, their community, their family and their identity.

Through the recounting of their experiences, survivors frame and make sense of an experience that is hard, even for them, to grasp or believe. Survivors write and record their experiences to preserve them and gather them into a form that confers meaning. The key here is the word experience. A video camera may record everything that transpires, but it experiences nothing. Experience belongs to the consciousness of a person; it arises in the encounter between the world of experience and one’s thoughts and sense of self. It is the survivor’s experience that your students will be privileged to hear.

Survivors often speak of a sense of obligation to tell the world what happened, which provided a strong incentive for survival during the Holocaust. For many, the responsibility of survival is unfulfilled unless they speak or write. Survivors are motivated to bear witness and to honour the memory of lost family members. They are also motivated by acts of racism and genocide in the world around them and the desire to let young people know that they can make a difference.

Although many survivors are well informed about various aspects of the Holocaust outside their personal experiences, few are expert historians. Their presentations are personal, eyewitness accounts. Their presentation will be followed by a discussion period in which students will have the opportunity to ask questions. Students are encouraged to ask survivors questions that are different from those that they would ask of historians. The survivor knows what was in his/her gaze, within his/her realm of experience, what he/she felt and observed.

## **Provide Context and Historical Background**

Explain to students that any first-person account is limited by several variables including the survivor's age, gender and country of origin. Some were caught up early or later in the war. Some survived in hiding, others found themselves in labour camps, death camps, partisan or resistance groups. Ask students to be alert to these variables during the presentation and to understand that this is one person's personal account. In addition to providing a historical overview of the Holocaust, you may want to have students read a survivor's memoir or a book of youth fiction in advance of the survivor's presentation.

You may also want to emphasize that survivors are aging and passing away, and that we may be the last generation that will have the opportunity to hear from eyewitnesses of the Holocaust.

## **Encourage Student Questions**

Survivors appreciate interacting with students, so please encourage your students to ask their speaker questions. Students may prepare a list of questions for the speaker in advance of their presentation, and may share their lists with their classmates. Students may wish to ask the speaker about why they have chosen to recount their experiences. Alternatively, students may choose to respond not with a question, but by sharing a personal reflection about how the survivor's story has affected them, or what it has made them think about, feel or resolve to do.

## **Provide Opportunities for Reflection**

Ask students to keep journals to help them reflect on what they are hearing from and discussing with a survivor. Journals can be used by teachers to carry on a dialogue with students about a variety of related issues. After the presentation, ask students: What did you learn from the survivor that you did not know before? How did this account change your understanding of the Holocaust? Which issues, raised by the speaker, are still with us today? How can this first person account help us address issues of prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, social justice and genocide today? What would you like to know more about?

## **Letters to Survivor Speakers**

Survivors are always delighted to hear from students. Students may share their personal responses to the survivor's presentation, as well as what they learned about the Holocaust. All correspondence can be addressed to the survivor care of the Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, 50-950 West 41st Avenue, Vancouver BC, V5Z 2N7.

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**Additional educational support material is available on the VHEC's website:  
[www.vhec.org](http://www.vhec.org)**



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