

Memory and Legacy: Preparing to Learn from Descendants of Holocaust Survivors

[Paul Capobianco]

"Memory is never seamless, but always a montage of collected fragments, a combination of pieces and recomposed by each person and each generation."

We'll come back to this at the end, but for now let's keep that in mind.

The class is an eighth-grade Social Studies class. It's "Genocide and Human Behavior," based on Facing History and Ourselves' Holocaust and Human Behavior curriculum. Each year I bring something new to the curriculum, and one thing, in particular, this year has been what can we get from second generation survivors? I became open to this idea when Facing History mentioned it to me of the children of survivors. There's significance in their stories, and that story is a reflection of the survivors.

So let's consider this. I've talked to you about the danger of a single story. The danger of a single story, that's where stereotypes are created. That's how prejudice grows and spreads. But in the context of what we're talking about today, there's significance in a single story and a person's identity is shaped by their experiences, just as a survivor's identity was shaped by the Holocaust. But imagine growing up as a child of a Holocaust survivor, growing up in the house with someone who went through the Holocaust and survived. How can a survivor's Holocaust experience affect the identity of the child? Do you have any thoughts on that? What do you think could be passed on from a survivor to their children? Before we get into it in too much detail, what are your initial thoughts? Isaac?

[Isaac]

I think maybe like fear. I think that fear—

[Paul Capobianco]

That fear might be passed down?

[Student 1]

Yeah, maybe fear of people who are other than you cause I think that if you're a Holocaust survivor, you have a really large fear of Germans and people, like people outside your community. So you might have that same fear.

[Paul Capobianco]

So there might be specific people that the child might grow up being fearful of, because the parents may exhibit that, too. How do the parents decide what to tell their children? And that, in terms of their experience, their story, what they went through in the Holocaust? What would be . . . why would it be too much to tell all the stories to a child? Aiden?

[Aiden]

Some stuff that would be too much is like going into the super graphic details of everything—

[Paul Capobianco]

Graphic detail.

[Student 2]

—cause like you don't always need to know the graphic details to know what happened, but probably knowing what happened and what the parent went through would probably be what I think they'd tell.

[Paul Capobianco]

Other thoughts on what might be too much? Brogan, you want to say something?

[Brogan]

It might be too much for a young kid who is just a bit too young to be, I guess, trying to understand this.

[Paul Capobianco]

Yeah, it's hard to understand that people could be this cruel.

Let's broaden this a little bit more: what other choices might survivors have to make, in terms of sharing their stories with their children? What choices, what do they have to decide about what they're going to share? Virginia?

[Virginia]

The survivors would also have to like think about how much they want to tell their child before maybe they learn about it in school, like we are right now, about how much they want to tell them before they learn it from someone who is just teaching off of a course.

[Paul Capobianco]

Yes, who knows where they could learn it from, right?

[Virginia]

Yeah, they don't know where. It could just pop up anywhere and the child might not have enough information and might not connect the dots as quickly.

[Paul Capobianco]

Great point, because you don't know where children are gonna learn about the Holocaust. Not everybody takes a course on the Holocaust. Hopefully more people do. But I want to capture some of your thinking in your journals right now, too. Let's go back to our original quote. Just write that quote again, so you get it in your mind. I'd like you to answer these questions. What can we learn about the lasting effects of the Holocaust on the children of the survivors? What have you gotten from today's class that you can add to something you've written before on that?

As some of you are finishing that up, I'm just going to tell you a couple of things to close.

"Imagine it, the end of an era, the last person able to testify to all that transpired, to all that befell us, the last person who could affirm that we indeed saw what we saw

is gone. Of all the rememberers, I alone am left to sit here knowing that my time will also come. And then what becomes of the tale?"

I ended the class reading Rabbi Pollock's words from "The Last Witness". Often the last thing they hear is the thing that I know will stick with them. So, I did that purposefully because those words are very strong. And it's about that idea of being the last witness. Well, hearing from the child of a survivor next week they—now have that idea of—well, really who is the last witness? And how long does this story go on?

And that's the piece that I hope they took with them, is not only that alright we're coming to the time when there are fewer and fewer Holocaust survivors here to tell us their stories, but we do have this opportunity to learn more from people who are touched by it, who are connected to it. If not through their families, through even learning about it as they are. They start to see their responsibility. That this knowledge has been imparted to them—what are you going to do with it?