Connecting Community to Survivor Testimony
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This paper will focus on how survivor testimony will be used to connect a variety of populations within a community in order to teach about the Holocaust. As we search for avenues by which to keep testimony alive, we must also discover who will be exposed to the material. At some level, the topic of the Holocaust continues to become of interest to a wider populous – not only through university courses and research, but through public lecture, film, exhibitions and programs of remembrance. Research and available testimony are quite abundant – but how do we help connect this material to individuals?

My paper will discuss specific survivor stories and how these stories can connect to the community where they live(d) in post-Holocaust years. For example, in well-populated communities where “newcomers” (as they were called) immigrated, there are often patterns to their Holocaust experience that translate into how they later created their livelihood and integrated into their surroundings. We will examine how the community in which they live(d) was motivated or influenced by the survivors’ story and how we can better look at their testimonies to understand how a community identifies itself today.

In another realm, the paper will explore the testimony of a Holocaust survivor and his family who were the only survivor family (as well as the only Jews) living in a very rural area in Nebraska. This survivor testimony will be used as a way to help new generations in that area learn about the successes of this survivor in a post-Holocaust experience. More importantly, though, it will also discuss how families and businesses interacted with the survivor family. They can today use the testimony of this individual to bring a new layer of Holocaust awareness in a community were there are no longer Jews or survivors. This survivor testimony can be integrated into the regional chamber of commerce history, into school curriculum, and as an example of immigrant struggle and success. In rural areas such as these in Nebraska and many other states, there is new immigration of Latino families who face strong prejudice and hardship. Using Holocaust survivor testimony of an individual who settled in their own community not only provides the opportunity to delve into the history of the Holocaust, but can challenge a larger community to eliminate their own prejudices and build a bright future among new and old community members.

A third component of the paper will explore how individual survivor testimony can be used to build human relations within a business, school, or other group environment. I will use the example of providing training among employees in a home for the aging. The employee population was very diverse, and as we presented short survivor testimonies about life in the ghetto, family separations and other tragedies, individuals began to open discussion about their own lives and experiences. The program was designed to help the employees better understand the survivors who were residents in the home, but it also opened a new dialogue among the employees and offered new respect within the workplace.

I believe the significance of finding diverse communities with whom to share survivor testimony opens doors to teach about the lessons of the Holocaust. The abundance of research and gathering of testimony over the past 20-30 years provides an opportunity to bring the material to those who might not otherwise have access or exposure to the stories. Now, it is our responsibility and challenge to accomplish this task.