

1st Place Senior Essay
Anonymous
Seoul International School, Seoul, South Korea, Michael Silber

Survivors' Testimony: Personal Connections for a Better Future

The dread in my heart when I listened to Holocaust survivor, Hanns Loewenbach, recount being identified on the streets of Berlin by an SS officer, a former classmate, is a feeling no history textbook can induce. The uniqueness of each survivor's testimony allows us to present the tragedy of the Nazi Holocaust in the most compelling and lasting way, allowing readers to attempt to conceptualize its historical singularity and unthinkable horrors. Survivor testimonies provide painful but historically essential information no other sources could ever reveal. Though rightly considered "singular," there is nevertheless an increasingly terrifying danger of a recurrence of genocidal ethnic violence, making it crucial to teach and learn the Holocaust through survivors' accounts.

In his testimony, Loewenbach describes the discrimination that began long before Hitler's rule: he remembers being beaten up in public by ten classmates just for being Jewish while the rest of the student body looked on passively. After Hitler took power and began stripping Jews of rights and then deporting them to concentration camps, Loewenbach made the desperate decision to swim across the icy Baltic waters to Denmark to plead for protection. As soon as he reached these shores, however, a Danish officer confronted him and told him to swim back to Berlin, threatening that he would otherwise be turned over to German officers - a fate that meant certain death.

Though pedagogically, and therefore politically, indispensable, the powerful effects of survivor testimony by no means exclusively serve students. If Loewenbach had not decided to speak up, then historians, themselves, might never have known this specific detail about life in Nazi Germany and its surrounding politics. Neither could historians had otherwise divined Loewenbach's incredulity when a German officer asked him, "Aren't you happy?" when offered a spot in the German Army, or similar

surprise when his former classmate-turned SS officer offered to forge a passport for him instead of turning him in.

The accumulation of Holocaust survivor testimony not only fills an objective lacuna in the historical record but also helps preserve politically necessary examples of this atrocity in order to prevent its recurrence. If revisionist historians value “official” records and secondary sources shorn of emotion over primary sources, because they presume that survivor testimonies are “unreliable” and “trauma-based,” then they are failing to employ the most vivid and effective method to record the Holocaust, a catastrophe whose memory must be preserved to ensure a brighter future. In addition, especially because survivors often recount feeling fearful of revealing their histories, we must be especially proactive in seeking out and preserving their testimonies. Loewenbach famously said “Evil does not need your help, just your indifference” after first encountering Elie Wiesel, a fellow Holocaust survivor and acclaimed author of *Night*. In turn, Wiesel told Loewenbach that they must speak out about the Holocaust for those whose lives were taken and could not speak for themselves.

I vividly remember the rainy day in May of 2017 when I had the privilege of interviewing a former Korean comfort woman, who had been forced into sexual slavery during the Japanese occupation of Korea during the Second World War. Her name was Yi Ok-Seon. Yi had also initially hidden her past, avoiding personal shame, and blame by concealing her victimization by Japanese military officers. Like Loewenbach, however, she could not endure the possibility that victims like her might be erased from history, ultimately inspiring her to speak out at countless conferences and commemorations, in addition to me, a high schooler working on a humble documentary. I still remember the atmosphere in the room weighing down on me and the angst in her voice as she said, “We are all over the age of 90, and all we want is for the Japanese to listen and apologize.”

In studying historical events, students often empathize with past plights using relatable personal experience, but this is rarely the case for genocide or the Holocaust. For the average student, it is

difficult to understand the unique horrors of the Holocaust when our access is primarily through secondary sources - including competing popular media narratives. Only survivor testimonies capture emotions and humanity of the very people who endured those horrors and thereby facilitate an unmediated, empathetic response from students. It is time for us to realize that, in considering the pedagogical and political reasons for preserving primary source testimony, we must not overlook the psychological *imperative* to hear the voices of the tortured and the dead. The preservation of survivor testimony not only enriches the learning of history through original accounts that offer a genuine connection across generations but also preserves the voices of past martyrs, providing, a priceless tool for building a better future.