

A Storyteller's Story Viewer's Guide
by Monica Eileen Patterson

This project began as the final project in a university history class. The assignment was for small groups to **curate*** a video recording of a Holocaust survivor's testimony,¹ in a way that raised questions about the stories people tell about the past, and how they are heard or understood by listeners. *A Storyteller's Story* is based on the video testimony of Ted Bolgar, a Jewish Hungarian Holocaust survivor residing in Montreal.

***curate- verb (used with object), cu·rat·ed, cu·rat·ing.**

to pull together, sift through, and select for presentation, as music or Web site content (*"We curate our merchandise with a sharp eye for trending fashion," the store manager explained*); to select, organize, and present (suitable content, typically for online or computational use), using professional or expert knowledge: *people not only want to connect when using a network but they also enjoy getting credit for sharing or curating information.*²

After viewing his testimony, the student filmmakers met with Mr. Bolgar a number of times to talk with him about his role as a Holocaust educator. They learned that Mr. Bolgar has been giving public presentations about his experiences during World War II for the past twenty-five years, and that through the retelling of his story hundreds of times, he has fine-tuned it into a narrative that is virtually the same every time he tells it. He believes that sharing his experiences with younger generations is his moral duty, and does so to ensure that the Holocaust is never forgotten. In the last few years, he has been asked to tell his story so many times that he considers giving such presentations to be his "full-time job."

A Storyteller's Story explores the repetitive nature of Mr. Bolgar's testimony, and asks questions regarding the transmission and reception of **difficult knowledge**.*

¹ For more information on this and other recorded testimonies of the "Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide, and other Human Rights Violations" oral history project, see: <http://www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca/> [Accessed December 12, 2012].

² www.dictionary.com [Accessed December 12, 2012].

***Difficult knowledge** is a concept developed by education theorist Deborah Britzman.³ As opposed to the easily assimilated ‘lovely knowledge’ of comfortable truths, ‘difficult knowledge’ induces a breakdown of interpretive certitude and solidness of identity, forcing audiences to confront unfamiliar perspectives, unsettling and disarming them, and thus opening new spaces for learning, understanding, and growth.

We encourage you to consider the following questions, and to develop some of your own, through the exercises that follow.

Before you watch the film, discuss these questions:

The Holocaust

1. What was the Holocaust?
2. What do you know about it?
3. How do you know about it?

Testimony

4. What is testimony?
5. What are some examples of testimony that you are familiar with?

Survivors

6. Why might you want to hear a survivor of violence talk about his or her life?
7. What would you want to ask a survivor?
8. What would you expect or hope to hear from a survivor?
9. Are there certain things you wouldn't ask? What? And why?
10. How do you think the label “survivor” shapes the way you view such a person?

Watching the film

11. What do you hope to gain by watching this film?
12. What do you think a film might give you that reading a book wouldn't? How about listening to your teacher explain things to you?

³ Britzman, Deborah. 1998. [*Lost Subjects. Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning.*](#) Albany: State University of New York Press.

Read the questions below before you watch the film, and discuss them after you have watched the film:

1. Why do you think Ted Bolgar repeats his story the same way each time he tells it to different audiences?
2. How did it feel to hear his story the first time?
3. Did that change once you heard it again and again?
4. Does the repetition of the story change your feelings about it? (Does it make it more valuable? Less?)
5. What else would you like to know about Ted and his life story that wasn't in the film?

⇒ *To learn more about Mr. Bolgar, see the "About Ted" page on our website at: http://cerev.org/Projects/Ted_Bolgar/?page_id=11*

6. What, if anything, moved you in this film?
7. How would you describe Ted in the classroom versus when he's talking to the filmmakers?

Further Reflection: Additional Questions to consider

1. Watch Ted's presentation (<http://youtu.be/RwEEtwhvrBE>). What story does he tell? What is left out? What is emphasized?
2. Pay attention to the music that is included in the film. How does it affect you and your feelings about what you are watching?
3. What do we expect from (Holocaust) survivors?
4. Do you think of survivors differently having watched this film?
5. What do you, and the general public expect from survivor testimony?
6. What might be problematic about these expectations?

University-level discussion questions

⇒ Recommended reading: “Re-curating Testimony: Toward a New Pedagogy for Learning from the Past,” Erica Lehrer and Monica Eileen Patterson. *Anthropology News*. American Anthropological Association, September 2011. (available at: http://cerev.concordia.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/AN52.6.w.Patterson_Lehrer.pdf)

1. Philosopher Elaine Scarry has argued that one person’s experiences of pain and violence cannot ever be truly understood by another.⁴ Do you agree? Why or why not?
2. Scholars in the 1980s and philosophers long before them debated the definition of violence. While some argued that what constitutes violence should be limited to the physical and concrete, others have tried to carve out a broader domain to accommodate things like structural and symbolic violence. What is your definition of violence? How does it help you to understand Ted Bolgar’s experience? How has Ted Bolgar informed your definition?
3. Why do stories of suffering command such interest? Is it voyeuristic to listen to accounts of pain and suffering? Why or why not?
4. “Never Again!” is a slogan that emerged in the wake of the Holocaust, and gained further prominence as “Nunca Mas!” in Latin America in response to the human rights abuses that took place in the Southern Cone in the 1980s. Despite being regularly invoked as a rallying cry for a wide variety of causes, incidents of mass violence continue to occur, and may even be on the rise. How should we understand the gap between continued invocations of this slogan and the reality of ongoing violence? What do you think would be needed to stop genocide forever? Does survivor testimony help to achieve this goal?
5. The Holocaust has been cast by many scholars, survivors, and sympathizers as the paradigm of mass atrocity. Such exceptionalism continues despite brutal past and present crimes against humanity that have gone on for longer and resulted in many more deaths. How is the Holocaust unique, and how is it comparable to or connected to other instances of mass violence? Does Holocaust exceptionalism create a hierarchy of suffering, or does it help us understand important differences

⁴ Scarry, Elaine. 1985. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

between particular instances of state-sponsored violence? What is at stake in calls to consider the Holocaust as simply one instance of genocide alongside other events? How do claims to uniqueness or comparison shape possibilities for historical understanding, political action, and personal identification with groups who have experienced mass violence and oppression?