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Communities of memory? The Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre, Melbourne

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Abstract

The Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre (JHC), Melbourne, opened in 1984. Through the support of large numbers of Jewish people, it has become an important part of their lives as they age, a place of solace and memorialisation. It is a second home for some, providing networking support within and between the different Jewish ethnic communities. This paper will draw on the JHC's ever growing videotestimony collection as well as oral interviews on the roles played by Melbourne survivor volunteers and others in developing the Centre. The survivors have experienced many different aspects of the Holocaust, have come from all over Europe and elsewhere, and are sometimes culturally very different. It will discuss the role played by the various social and cultural communities in creating and responding to the JHC and the success they have had in establishing 'communities of memory' or, alternatively, representing and contextualising the various social and cultural communities.

Introduction

Since 2003, with the financial support of an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant, I have been part of a group of researchers analysing videotestimonies of Holocaust survivors who settled in Melbourne. Our book, called Testifying to the Holocaust, edited by Pam Maclean, Dvir Abramovich and myself, was published in 2008. Since then, a research team with a slightly modified membership has been writing the broader history of the Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre in Melbourne, which opened in 1984. Throughout this article, this institution will be referred to as the JHC or the Centre.

The paper was written specifically for the 17th National Conference of the Oral History Association of Australia (OHAA), held in Melbourne from 6 to 9 October 2011. The theme was ‘Communities of Memory’. Most presentations focused on catastrophes, human disasters and their aftermath: droughts, floods, persecution, wars, on-going trauma etc. The survivors often formed groups, preserved special places and shared their life stories through oral history. Stories were also documented to give the chance for others to discover unknown histories. Through the testimonies of other survivors, we can understand the importance of these life stories for future generations.

From the perspective of the JHC, the preservation of memory serves multiple functions which mission statements over the years have included, for example:

- to honour the memory of Jewish victims;
- to convey the experience of survivors;
- to create a resource for research and education for both the Jewish and wider community;
- to counter denial of the Holocaust;
- to promote tolerance in the wider Australian community.

The JHC’s mission statement later became more general, such as:

- The JHC is an institution dedicated to the memory of the six million Jews who were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators between 1933 and 1945, and
- We consider the finest memorial to all victims of racist policies to be an educational program which aims to combat anti-Semitism, racism and prejudice in the community and foster understanding between people.

What is the JHC for and how do we preserve the survivor memories and overall message to others? How successful has it been in establishing ‘communities of memory’ or, alternatively, in representing the experiences of various other social and cultural communities? As the Holocaust survivors age, has forgetting their experiences been more prevalent than remembering? This oral history project is based on the answers to such key questions through the opinions of survivors who, over the years, have had a close
that people had contributed. Anne believed in keeping alive the memory of those who died. In her interview in 2009, we asked her what her own feelings were for the Centre over the last 25 years. She explained that many of the guides were no longer survivors; they were trained people mostly from later generations. The JHC had become a social meeting place where they were picked up and taken home after a lunch or informal occasion once a fortnight. Anne refers to the many groups within the JHC today, some long standing like the Child Survivors’ Group, and another for the second generation of survivors now in their sixties or older, which had only been in existence for about two years at the time of Anne’s interview.

Anne also acknowledged the remarkable volunteer guides and donations from supporters, (not always Jewish), for upgrading the buildings and equipment. Phillip, the Head of the Testimonies Department, and others were and still are, very devoted to the JHC. Without such people, it would not exist or not as effectively. We asked what would happen when there were no survivors left. Anne responded disparagingly:

Eventually, it will just be a museum. I think it’s a very good one, considerable, because having seen the museum in Israel which is remarkable, I think that this one here is very good. ... This is a very fine museum, but it’s very cold. It’s a museum. Initially, the number of survivors that helped it, that’s what made it, because the number of survivors in Melbourne was very large and many helped the museum and wanted to make it their memorial. To them it was a commemorative place. They’re dying out. To the Jewish people it’s a very holy place.

Anne obviously recognized the diversity of the JHC’s supporters and the value of the survivor guides.

On these issues, Saba, who began volunteering as a guide in September 1984, emphasizes that the JHC was always spoken of by the volunteers as ‘our museum’. There has been a strong sense of ownership and belonging over the last twenty-five years. Saba and others also felt that the Museum was a memorial even though they appreciated the need to have guidance in educating school children about the Holocaust. The exhibition is effective and ‘the feedback is colossal’, she reports about the first exhibition. ‘It does what it’s meant to do. For the Jewish community it has not just been an acknowledgement, but a verification and conservation of what happened’. This is what the JHC meant to many Jews in Melbourne, along with a strong sense of comradeship amongst the volunteers from its early years.

Several years ago, Ruth offered to volunteer as an Education Officer at the JHC. She drew up a list of Victorian schools and sent them material. School children benefitted from her work, which was very
popular. Ruth was involved for at least 12 years. The interviewers asked her who the Centre was for and who it served. Ruth explained that survivors wanted to help; they turned up every week and learnt on the job. They wanted to ask her every month about various issues. They got a name for themselves in the Jewish, then in the general, community. They were very enthusiastic and received all the support they needed from Aron and Bono who supported them and had a profile in the community. In the early days, the JHC was little known but it quickly gained a name, and a place on the map. This handful of people did it, she emphasizes. There was nothing else binding them. They came from different backgrounds and their survival experiences were diverse. Nonetheless, they were a ‘community’. They always had a brief overview of the war issues, then a film, then one or more survivors speaking about their war experiences. Then they would all go downstairs and look at the exhibition. Survivor guides would show them around, a routine which lasted many years. That’s what they devised as the education program and often the same schools came year after year. The guides would also go out to schools and normally Ruth went with them. The schools were very eager for them to come as the relationship was close and a type of community also existed in that realm.21

The responses from Jewish students were often less enthusiastic than those of the non-Jewish students since the former were taught these issues anyway. The situation improved but no one could replace what the survivor guides had to tell; they were there at a very early stage. Ruth regarded them as special groups of people. She was a volunteer herself and talked to the others constantly about the education program. She had a sense of duty to the memories of the survivors of the families they had lost but they also had their own lives to live with children, grandchildren and other interests. Nonetheless, the number of visitors grew over the years to several thousands. For example, in 2001 they had 20,000 school children and 6,000 other visitors coming through.22 Sometimes the survivors went on too long in their testimonies and were encouraged to speak only about their own experiences. They were not allowed to speak about hearsay, hatred or the politics of Israel. Once this was understood, everyone complied. They did start talking about Indigenous issues and also about other places of conflict or catastrophe, reflecting parts of the mission statement. Overall though, Ruth felt this picture of the survivors was misunderstood.20

Henri’s introduction to the JHC came via a request to do a testimony. He had done three other testimonies (one as a child) and written an autobiography. He explains that the idea of ‘child survivors’ is a relatively recent concept of the 1980s.21 It was widely accepted that children under fifteen were not affected by living through the Holocaust. It was expected that children like Henri would not have understood, therefore would not have suffered. This is what he was given to understand. He appreciated that his parents had gone through terrible times but at fifteen he realised that he had a life ahead, and was young enough to brush it off. This was what his testimony taught him but he rarely made an issue of it. Others in his situation also suppressed or rarely talked about their experiences.

Nonetheless, a Child Survivors’ Group was formed at the JHC which met informally and members told their stories to each other, in a separate ‘community’. They met with a psychiatrist on hand, Paul, a child survivor himself, but many were unaware of the trauma their parents had gone through. People in this group mostly felt relieved to tell their stories, and be able to talk about their past. More women took part than men and the members were mostly Hungarian. The founder of this group was also Hungarian, unlike most of the other Jews associated with the JHC who were predominantly Poles. Indeed, many child survivors felt they did not fit into the group owing to ethnic and social divisions which were causing rifts. For example, several were French or Belgian. Henri acknowledges that the JHC community was largely Polish but this particular space for child survivors seemed to be predominantly from other countries, such as Hungary. Hence, from his child survivor’s perspective, this was not a ‘community of memory’ for all; it had its internal ethnic and political groupings.22

Henri explains that although everyone was invited to come, there were differences and social disconnections which made people, like the Lithuanians, feel left out. So there were social problems which were difficult to overcome. The leaders of the Child Survivors’ Group allowed you to speak, Henri reports, but the languages and accents were different, even though they spoke Yiddish. Despite the fact that the JHC provided a place of consolation for all Jews, survivors and their families and friends had their ethnic and cultural differences and so did not always constitute close ‘communities of memory’.23

The survivors of Bialystok have a commemoration each year and the survivors from Lodz commemorate the liquidation of the ghetto every year. ‘Indeed, the whole Jewish community commemorates “Yom Hashoah” (Holocaust day) every year. This is to remember the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto which took place on 19 April 1943 where a small number of Jews resisted the German might. It is a date marked in the Jewish calendar for Jews everywhere.’24

Another issue Anne mentioned was to get sponsors for the Centre and more formally, a group called ‘The Friends’ emerged. Sponsorship was necessary for the Centre to survive and carry out its mission. These cohorts of supporters for the Centre organise social events together representing groups of people with something in common. Henri argues that the culture
is changing; the JHC is becoming all-encompassing, even to the extent of encouraging non-Jewish people to join them, or anyone who has suffered some form of discrimination. They want it to be a Museum of the Holocaust but approachable by everyone. Henri now knows that he wasn’t alone, but admits that quite a few child survivors (mostly women) would only speak with other child survivors in their group, not to everyone. He argues that their stories must also be told. 25

Claude had previously been permanently employed twice but not at the JHC. 26 Getting to the end of paid employment, he looked for an avenue for volunteering. Having decided that the JHC was an excellent choice, he joined the organisation as a volunteer. For over nine years he volunteered and was then put back on the payroll. From 2009, he was doing 22 hours a week of paid employment, working in the JHC archives. Ursula, already Head of the Archives Department, was very happy to accept him as a volunteer and then a worker. He was also asked to do the accreditation paper work for the museum and then reaccreditation of the whole organisation. He was mainly involved with the cataloguing of the materials donated by people over the years.

In his interview we asked Claude what the importance of the Centre was to him. He answered that he was a child of the Holocaust, born in France in 1941 and, together with his parents, was hidden and saved by French farmers. He lost family members however; his grandparents perished in the Holocaust. His involvement has been to live for their memories and make sure that future generations are aware of what happened and try to ensure that it doesn’t happen again. I asked him directly who he thought the Centre was for. He answered that it was for the public and also for those who established the Museum. In his view the public meant the students who came to the museum and it was important to teach them about the events of the Holocaust to ensure their support and avoid a recurrence. He stressed that they must make sure that their voices are heard by combating anti-Semitism and racism. 27 His commitment to the JHC was very clear.

I asked him if this mission had changed over the years, or if it had a different focus at any time. He said no and especially in relation to the Archives. He hoped the large amount of material being collected and donated will be accessed and used for research. This was its primary purpose. He explained the management structure to us. Firstly, the JHC had a Board and a President. It had a Director and an Executive Director and each of the Departments had a Head. And then there are paid people who worked under those Heads of Departments and then there were the volunteers. At the time the professional people were far outnumbered by the guides but as the Museum established itself, it has put itself on a professional level, and for those people it has had to pay. In Claude’s view, in every area there would have to be one paid professional, maybe two. The volunteers would still be the major way of transmitting information. Even when the volunteers died out, he argued that owing to the technology that’s been acquired, there would still be equipment to put their information on record. Claude assured us that the volunteers today are being trained and are not necessarily survivors although most are Jewish. The JHC is a member of Museums Australia and, according to Claude, the new guides are getting the right training. In these ways it is a ‘community of memory’.

When Claude was asked whether they had enough material to do the job of both anti-Semitism and anti-racism, he was doubtful. Much valuable material disappeared or was thrown out by relatives who do not know the languages or importance of the material being destroyed. I asked if the JHC could function without a universalist philosophy, given the role of the Centre in Holocaust history and other museums doing much the same thing. He again suggested Museums Australia but pointed out that they must keep very much to their own area of archives. He emphasized that:

[T]he Museum had a very clear mission statement and should stick to it and whatever they did should accord with that mission statement. The current mission statement is to combat anti-Semitism and racism and ensure that the memory of the six million who died is not forgotten. 28

He thinks that everything should be done methodically and that the Museum is set up with exhibitions and especially there should be upgrading to bring the museum’s exhibitions up to modern standards. Again their background is crucial and that’s why it’s so important.

I asked Claude what he thinks is special in today’s work at the JHC. He replied that the special meaning of the Centre is the fact that its education is manned by its Holocaust survivors and when they all pass away, their archives will be used continually to educate future generations. That is because it’s a Holocaust Museum, not a museum for Jews in general. They form links with Jewish Museums Australia but although it is only in Australia, there are views that the two have to be kept separate.

I also asked Claude how efficient the JHC has been in fulfilling aspects of its mission over the last 25 years. He thought that the number of visitors to the Museum each year and the proportion of students in that number was a good indicator. The Centre encourages survivor family donations to make the story as authentic as it can be. He said:

After all, they set it up, it’s their Museum, and it has become more professional over time; the Museum display was upgraded in 2010. Increasing multiculturalism is more important today than ever,
and the people who died in the Holocaust still need to be remembered. We must modernize, keep in the 21st century, attract students, and use the most modern technology.29

In Claude’s view, the JHC fits into the broader sense of Jewish culture and memory through the recognition of its being one of the most important Holocaust museums in the world.

Geri volunteered at the JHC in 1994 and was very committed to it.30 She had heard about the Oral History Project and been to see Phillip. She explained to him at the time that she was interested in doing some interviewing. Her father was a Holocaust survivor so she had some degree of understanding and was trained by Pauline and Rae. Phillip was always set up with the camera at the back of the room and Geri’s role was always with the audio-visual recording, rather than simply an oral interview. Sitting in on their interviews, Geri learnt a lot just by listening and taking notes about the style of questioning, especially allowing the survivors to talk. Over time she developed her own particular style. At the time, there were meetings every month in the evenings held by Phillip, sometimes with fifteen people. These debriefing sessions sometimes led to lengthy discussions of deep involvement. She felt it was right for her to stay there.31

We asked her about the importance of the JHC to her and the length of time and nature of her association. For thirteen years she was there regularly but then sadly, the survivors died or the Centre ran out of survivors to interview others, causing a lull for a couple of years. Subsequently, at the start of 2011, Geri came back. Between 1994 and 2012, there had only been a recent gap of three years in Geri’s interviewing which shows great commitment on her part and willingness to be a member of a ‘community’ group.

We asked Geri about the importance of the JHC to her personally or collectively. She paused for some time and sighed, then said that it was important to have a place, an actual building that houses survivors and everything that goes with them. She thought it was really about memory and a home for the survivors and their records. She was speaking collectively. For the survivors to have a place that they can call their own, represents their survival and their very existence. A place they can share, where they can educate other people, must mean a lot to them in the light of ‘communities of memory’. She sees survivors feeling very much at home there. She finds it a joy to sit in the tea room where they have their breaks in their departments and come together. Conversation might start about what they are doing at the week-end but it always ends up back in Auschwitz or back home or with their parents. The memories of their families are probably the most difficult thing for them aside from their own struggles and survival. She thinks the loss of family members is the largest problem for them and that’s why they always end up talking about it.

The Centre for Geri was a place she could also call home in the sense that she grew up under the dark shadow of her father’s struggles. Even though he wasn’t obsessed with them, they were there, and she always felt for his losses. Thus for her also, the Centre is a place that validates their survival. Later generations, like her father, went often to Acland Street, St. Kilda (a suburb of Melbourne where Jews congregate in cafes), but he still gave a testimony at the Holocaust Centre. Geri says:

I just feel for the survivors – this is not about me
- I’ve always thought that these survivors, each and every one of them, in their own way, are to be admired and celebrated, and irrespective of whether they’re good people or generous people or bad people or whatever, I just feel that, for them, to have a Centre called the Holocaust Centre, they deserve at least that ... It’s a recognition and a validation of Holocaust survivors. So I look at them as a group of people and I think that as a group they are to be acknowledged and celebrated and given respect. But then the individual testimony situation which I’ve had the privilege of, has enabled me to validate individuals rather than just the group.32

The case then is not always ‘a community of memory’.

I asked Pauline (at the time of writing, President of the Board of the JHC), what the JHC meant to her as a person.33 She responded:

Beyond even having to come to terms with it, I couldn’t grasp it. I think of my father who came from Berlin and survived Nazi Germany and fortunately came to Australia in 1938. It wasn’t until the Shoah Foundation came into being that I understood that some people between 1933 and 1945 were affected by Nazi policy; that’s a survivor.34 And there are different levels obviously. And something drew me. Through my life, what is it I wanted to understand? Coming here, when I came in to do the testimonies, it was like, yes, I can do something; I can feel empowered, because I’m able to contribute on a real level and - I’m not being cliché - I could come in here, I could do something with these testimonies. They’re going to be here. I’m building up working with the survivors. I have the greatest respect for the survivors; they’ve taught me so much and to be with them I’m often in awe at how they’ve put their lives together. It was very important. So that for me is the place for me.35

But it’s also when I see what it does for people. They can come in as volunteer Willy says: ‘I haven’t got a gravestone, I haven’t got a marker.’ This is for me where I can remember my family. This is the point of commemoration. It makes it
Conclusion

There are just some of the reasons why Melbourne Holocaust survivors, their descendants, friends and others come together at the JHC as a place representing a 'community of memory' (singular), or 'communities of memories' (plural), places depicted as positive or negative. The testimonies drawn upon here reveal that the significance of the JHC can be influenced by the giver of the information whether it is survivors, survivor volunteers, non-survivor volunteers, paid employees who are survivors, board members who are survivors or children of survivors, and many others. This may affect the significance of the survivors or others. It is important to note that a person's connection to the JHC can change radically over time. One may become very closely involved in it for some years, but at other times not, depending on the current situation and particular feelings. Connections are varied and fluent. Another point to consider is the extent to which we are dealing with a 'community of memory' or 'communities of memories' as this implies connections between those doing the remembering. This of course brings up numerous questions about forgetting and the implications of this.

For many Jewish people in Melbourne, the JHC has become an important part of their lives and, as they say, a place of solace and memorialisation. It is, in fact, a second home for some, providing networking support within and between the various Jewish ethnic communities. The premise of this paper is how significant the JHC has become for those who have been involved in it over time. This article has drawn on the JHC's own oral and video archives, especially some recent interviews conducted by our research team at Deakin University on the roles played by some of the Melbourne survivor volunteers and paid staff. The interviews largely indicate a very close relationship in terms of developments over time. The interviews focus on how the Centre has developed and is now viewed. Holocaust survivors and their many different experiences, have come from all over Europe and elsewhere, and are sometimes culturally and politically very different. Nonetheless, the Centre has become a place hosting 'communities of memory' for regular meetings of various kinds, especially those we call child survivors and second and third generation organisations and groupings.\textsuperscript{37} Much of the history and aims of the JHC have been shaped, supported and upheld by the staff and volunteers who are linked to the Centre.

(Endnotes)

1 Pam Maclean, Michele Langfield and Dvir Abramovich (eds), Testifying to the Holocaust, Australian Association of Jewish Studies, Sydney, 2008.
4 In 2011, the Jewish Holocaust Centre Mission Statement could be found at http://www.jhc.org.au/about-the-centre.html
7 Stan Marks' editorial Centre News, Vol. 27, No. 1, April/May 2005, See pp. 1, 12, 21, 24 and 26.
8 Personal communication with Saba, 9 March 2012. See also Marks, 10 Years, p.57.
9 The Bund, short for Jewish Labour Bund, was a Jewish socialist movement in Poland. See Judith E. Berman, Holocaust Remembrance in Australian Jewish Communities, 1945-2000, University of Western Australian Press, 2001, p. 27.
10 Interview with Pinche (who died in 2012) by Pam Maclean and Andrea Witcomb, 19 May 2009.
12 Interview with Anne by Donna-Lee Frieze and Michele Langfield, 24 July 2009.
13 Ibid.
14 Interview with Anne by Donna-Lee Frieze and Michele Langfield, 24 July 2009.
15 Interview with Saba by Andrea Witcomb and Linda Young, 28 April 2009.
16 Ibid.
17 Stan Marks (ed.) 10 Years, Jewish Holocaust Museum and Research Centre Melbourne, 1984-1994, p.60.
18 Interview with Ruth by Pam Maclean and Bill Anderson, 5 May, 2009.
19 Personal Communication from Willy, 7 March 2012.
20 Interview with Ruth by Pam Maclean and Bill Anderson, 5 May, 2009.
21 Interview with Henri by Donna-Lee Frieze and Michele Langfield, 6 October 2010.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Contribution from Saba, 9 March 2012.
25 Ibid.
26 Interview with Claude by Donna-Lee Frieze and Michele Langfield, 9 July 2009.

27 Interview with Claude by Donna-Lee Frieze and Michele Langfield, 9 July 2009. Direct quotations have been used where possible but much of the material is paraphrased.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Interview with Geri, by Donna-Lee Frieze and Michele Langfield, 8 April 2011.

31 The Spielberg Foundation is the USC Shoah Foundation Institute collection of 52,000 videotaped Holocaust testimonies. The entire collection is available for viewing at YadVashem’s Visual Center at www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/about/visual_center/usc.asp.

32 Ibid.

33 Pauline, interviewed by Donna-Lee Frieze and Michele Langfield at the JHC, on 6 May 2011.

34 The Shoah Foundation is an organization that was formed to further the remembrance of the Holocaust of World War II.

35 Pauline, interviewed by Donna-Lee Frieze and Michele Langfield at the JHC, on 6 May 2011.
