

Carson Phillips

“THE LIMITS OF MY LANGUAGE ARE THE LIMITS OF MY WORLD”: USING RECORDED TESTIMONIES OF HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS WITH ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

“The limits of my language are the limits of my world.” *Ludwig Wittgenstein*

One need only look around the city of Toronto, Canada, to see its diversity represented through a staggering array of cultural festivals, literary and culinary forums, and of course through the visual imagery of its citizenry. A population of approximately 2.8 million lives and thrives within the city’s boundaries, surging to 5.5 million in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Toronto’s diverse population can be seen as a microcosm of the country’s immigration patterns. However, it is the active use of languages other than English or French, Canada’s two official languages, that is perhaps one of the most dominant indicators of diversity. The 2011 Canadian census identified more than 140 languages and dialects that are actively spoken by families and communities living in the metropolitan Toronto area. The top five mother-tongue languages, other than English and French, are directly related to traditional and emerging immigration patterns. These include Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin), Italian, Punjabi, Tagalog/Filipino, and Portuguese. Such richness in linguistic and cultural diversity also means that many newcomers | 1 to Canada may not have a Western orientation to history, and herein lies the challenge for meaningful Holocaust education.

The educational program I detail in this article was created in response to numerous requests from teachers for Holocaust education designed specifically for adult English Language Learners (ELL) and newcomers to Canada. The impetus for the development was Canada’s year chairing the *International*

Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). In consultation with representatives from the former government department *Citizenship and Immigration Canada* (CIC), a series of educational workshops was proposed in which newcomers would be introduced to the subject of the Holocaust in a manner that met their learning needs and through the lenses of citizenship and integration. It was imperative that these learning programs incorporated English language acquisition methodology, as well as introducing the history of the Holocaust. The workshops were implemented at *Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada* (LINC) schools across the GTA and reached more than 500 learners during the first year.

Concept Development

The educational philosophy underpinning this program was that newcomers can learn about the Holocaust through the immigration experiences of Holocaust survivors who settled in Canada. Learning about the personal experiences of some of the 40,000 Jewish Displaced Persons who rebuilt their lives in Canada could prove to be a transformational learning experience for newcomers. Even though their own journey of emigration to Canada was vastly different from that of the Holocaust survivors, the shared experiences of learning a new language, adapting to new customs, building a new life in a country with different traditions and laws, and integrating into a new civil society established an empathetic learning environment.

Indeed, the Holocaust became a paradigm through which newcomers learn about Canadian society during and after the Second World War, as well as how Canada responded to the Jewish refugee crisis. The recorded testimonies of Holocaust survivors provided adult English Language Learners with powerful examples of individuals who lost nearly everything yet were determined to rebuild their lives and integrate into Canadian society. For some newcomers, I hoped that the Holocaust might also serve as a prism through which they could address their own personal and regional histories. In particular, those who fled violence and civil strife in their home country and arrived to build a new life in Canada might find encouragement and even resiliency in

listening to the recorded testimonies of Holocaust survivors. Through vivid descriptions of Toronto in the late 1940s and 1950s the recorded testimonies elucidate how Holocaust survivors overcame the systemic antisemitism that permeated much of Canadian society at that time. As Aleida Assman writes:

“The Holocaust has not become a single universally shared memory, but it has become a paradigm or template through which other genocides and historical traumas are very often perceived and presented. The Holocaust has not thereby replaced other traumatic memories around the globe, but has provided a language for their articulation.” (2007:14)

The post war Canadian society that Holocaust survivors encountered was very often homogenous, Protestant and of Anglo-Saxon derivation. It took several decades for it to transform into the diverse mosaic that newcomers encounter today.

The Methodology

For English Language Learners, the study of the Holocaust means acquiring new vocabulary, discovering unfamiliar historical places and events, and learning about the Jewish people, not only as victims of state-sponsored genocide but also as a living people. Many newcomers are unaware of the rich cultural traditions, religious practices and diversity of Canadian Jewry. By working with the recorded testimonies of Holocaust survivors, newcomers would learn not only about the arrival of the Displaced Persons, but also the Jewish community that pre-dated the postwar arrival of Jewish Displaced Persons. The recorded testimonies addressed the Jewish community as active, contributing members of Canadian civil society with deep roots in Canada.

Emily Amie Witty, an expert in ELL practices, shared her expertise to develop this program and helped me to transfer this information into teacher- and classroom-friendly formats. Her advice in establishing learning targets, developing vocabulary sheets and glossaries, and creating learning activities enabled a nuanced pedagogical approach that ensured the Holocaust was addressed in a meaningful manner for ELLs.

Additionally, this program used the concepts of historical thinking, a pedagogical method that encourages learners to think critically about complex historical events. While the introductory workshops acquainted learners with the foundational elements of Holocaust history, intermediate and advanced workshops dealt with topics such as Canada's refusal to accept Jewish refugees in the lead up to the Second World War, and how a catalyst for changing Canada's restrictive immigration policy slowly emerged after the war. In many sessions, primary source archival documents were analysed as a means to understanding the attitudes and prejudices that permeated Canadian civil society and what led to them changing. In other workshops, the students learnt about memorial culture in Canada and how national dates of remembrance may be commemorated at their children's schools. Throughout all levels of the workshops, the recorded testimony of Holocaust survivors was the common thread that linked all components together. It provided an important humanizing aspect to learning, not only about the dark periods of history but also in demonstrating the consequences that decisions can have on individuals and families.

Theory and Praxis

This program used the teaching guidelines recommended by the IHRA ¹² as well as language acquisition strategies. In pre-visit discussions with the regular LINC teachers, it soon became apparent that many adult learners were unfamiliar with European history and geography, and even less so with Judaism. Although vocabulary sheets and glossaries were provided in advance of the workshops to allow the regular LINC teachers to introduce and review them with their students, some students could not conceptualise what the Holocaust was, its magnitude, or how it forever altered Jewish life in Europe. The learners lacked the necessary vocabulary and conceptual understanding of the Holocaust in their mother tongue to be able to understand the Holocaust and how in its aftermath many of the surviving European Jews dispersed to North America, Australia, England, and British Mandate Palestine.

To ameliorate this, newcomer groups unfamiliar with European history were encouraged to acquire a foundation in their native language, using resources such as the UNESCO Guide *Why Teach About the Holocaust?* (2013). Students with well-developed skills in their first language have been shown to acquire an additional language more easily and that in turn, has a positive impact on academic achievement (Genesee 2006). As the guide is open-source and available in the six official UNESCO languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish), it quickly became an essential component of the pre-program materials. So essential was this guide to establishing a conceptual framework in a newcomer's mother tongue, that when it was discovered that the resource was not available in the native language of one of the largest newcomer groups in Toronto, we arranged for its translation into Punjabi. The experience of working with this publication confirmed that when adult learners have a conceptual understanding in their mother language, it becomes much easier for them to acquire the necessary vocabulary to discuss the topic in English.

Throughout the workshops, the recorded testimonies of Holocaust survivors are used by accessing the *USC Shoah Foundation's IWitness* ¹³ platform. At the introductory level, the program facilitator pre-selects several recorded testimonies representing a variety of survivor experiences on arrival in Canada. The focus is always on the latter sections of the recording: describing their arrival in Canada and beginning the process of integration. Learners are advised to pay close attention to the descriptions of what Canada was like in the late 1940s and 1950s, what challenges the Holocaust survivor faced immediately upon arrival, and what steps they took to rebuild their lives in Toronto. Depending on the language level of the class ¹⁴, the recordings may need to be reviewed more than once. When members of the group are confident that they have understood the testimony excerpt, the content is reviewed orally, and reinforced through a writing activity. This allows the instructor to check the understanding of the excerpt through aural comprehension, discussion, and written ability tests.

Learners are often asked to write down a quote or expression that the survivor used in the recorded testimony and that resonated with them. Depending on the level of the group, learners may write down words, feelings or descriptors that they associate with the quote, or they may be asked to write a short reflection piece on how they interpret the survivor's words. In the intermediate and advanced levels, learners may be asked to complete sentence frames on a chart or on paper to demonstrate that they understand the topic and are able to write about it with confidence. As examples, learners might complete a sentence frame such as "During the 1930s many Canadians believed that Jews were....." or "Canada changed its immigration policies and now....." Similarly, sentence frames could be chosen from the recorded testimonies of Holocaust survivors to check for aural and written comprehension.

Recorded Testimony of Max Eisen



Max Eisen. Image taken from the interview of Max Eisen provided by the USC Shoah Foundation - The Institute for Visual History and Education

For learners at the introductory level, I frequently use the recorded testimony of Max Eisen, a Jewish-Hungarian Holocaust survivor on *IWitness*. His speaking style is clear and concise, and students have always commented that he is easy to understand. By listening to his recorded testimony, learners discover some of the challenges that Holocaust survivors like Max encountered when they arrived in Canada. Although Max spoke Hungarian, Czech and German, he could not speak English when he arrived. Some Canadians found his Hungarian name Tibor unusual, so he changed to Max. He was aided by a social service agency, which arranged for him to take night classes to learn English, found living accommodation for him, and even helped him get his first winter coat in preparation for life in Canada (1995 Clip #201;03:21:58). Many ELLs in Canada have had similar experiences and Max's introduction to life in Canada is one with which they can empathise. When students are comfortable with the arrival in Canada part of Max's narrative, they go on to discover why he had to leave Europe, how the Holocaust affected his family, and what his life was like before the Holocaust. Through the combination of recorded testimony and learning activities, students engage with a layered approach to understanding how the Holocaust affected one individual and his family, and can go deeper into the testimony as they acquire knowledge and confidence.

Recorded Testimony of Anita Ekstein

In her recorded testimony focusing on her arrival in Canada in 1949, the Jewish-Polish Holocaust survivor Anita Ekstein describes enrolling in school and not being able to speak any English. After a caring teacher provided her with one-on-one instruction, Anita acquired fluency in English. In this latter portion of her testimony she also describes one of her proudest moments; when she graduated from York University in Toronto with a BA degree in 1985, at the same time that her son graduated with his master's degree in business. (1996 Clip #122; 02:02:41)

For newcomers, Anita's testimony is a powerful example that an individual can be resilient, and can acquire a new language and build a new life in the



Anita Ekstein. Image taken from the interview of Anita Ekstein provided by the USC Shoah Foundation - The Institute for Visual History and Education

aftermath of tragedy. I use this testimony with introductory level workshops and students always comment that they are inspired by her dedication and perseverance.

Recorded Testimony of Vera Schiff

The third testimony used in this program is that of Vera Schiff, a Jewish-Czech Holocaust survivor. Her narrative differs from the previous two as Vera was at a different point in her life; she was already married with a family when she emigrated to Canada in 1961. In fact, the move to Canada represented the second attempt at building a new life, as Vera had initially emigrated to Israel in 1949. When she arrived in Toronto, Vera was fluent in Czech, German and Hebrew; none of which were particularly useful for facilitating integration into Toronto society of the 1960s.

Additionally, the professional qualifications that she and her husband possessed were not recognised by the nursing and pharmacological associations in Canada. As well as needing to acquire English language skills, Vera and her husband needed to find jobs to support their young family and attend educational programs to attain professional accreditation in Canada. These are experiences that resonate with many adult ELLs in Toronto.



Vera Schiff. Image taken from the interview of Vera Schiff provided by the USC Shoah Foundation - The Institute for Visual History and Education, Sarah and Chaim Neuberger Holocaust Centre Collection

Newcomers frequently comment on the ease with which Vera introduces acronyms into her speaking style. This is common among Torontonians, who refer to many institutions and service providers by their acronyms. The Toronto Transit Commission is often referred to as the TTC, the Toronto General Hospital as the TGH and the Royal Ontario Museum as the ROM,

to give just a few examples. Indeed, Vera peppers her recorded testimony (Clip #139; Time Code 02:19:54) with acronyms including: U of T (University of Toronto), TIMT (Toronto Institute of Medical Technology), and TGH. The proficiency with which she has acquired this particular linguistic feature stands out to many newcomers. It is frequently cited as a positive example that with practise, adult learners of English can adopt regional linguistic vocabulary and forms.

These are just three examples of testimony excerpts used at the introductory level to demonstrate that whether they came to Canada as Displaced Persons, refugees or migrants, newcomers can acquire the English language skills necessary to integrate and to live productive lives.

Advanced Learners: Using Recorded Testimony with Archival Documents

I do not want to give the impression that the recorded testimonies I use address only the positive aspects of building a life in Canada. Frequently, individual testimonies can reveal the myriad of challenges Holocaust survivors faced in Canada. When working with ELLs at the advanced level, I encourage them to explore some of the testimonies available through the USC Shoah Foundation's IWitness platform and use the keyword search feature to explore aspects of the testimony that resonate with them. Initially, the focus is on the latter stages of the testimony, in which the Holocaust survivor describes their arrival and new beginning in Canada. Some describe changing their name to sound more English and less "foreign", others describe an unpleasant encounter when they were called "Greenies" or "Greeners" – a mildly pejorative slang term derived from the word "greenhorn", meaning a person who is not experienced or accustomed to local traditions and behaviour. Still others comment on not getting hired for a particular job because of the employer's antisemitism, and some testimonies describe aspects of Canadian society in the 1940s and 1950s that openly discriminated against its Jewish citizens. Through a gradual, layered approach, learners discover the often complex set of circumstances the Holocaust survivors encountered, how they dealt with it, and how the integrated.

When students in advanced workshops have encountered such details in a recorded testimony, I find it useful to introduce archival photographs that back up the description of Toronto during the postwar era, and get them to grapple with how Toronto transformed into the diverse city it is today. The first image (below) demonstrates the widespread Anglo-centric milieu of Toronto described not infrequently in some of the recorded testimonies. The dry-cleaning tag dated 1938, a piece of ephemera meant to be thrown away, now offers testimony to a Toronto of long ago. The tag includes the line: “We Are Not Jewish”. One imagines that the proprietor of the *French Dry Cleaners* must have been frustrated with constant questioning of his ethnicity in the predominantly English Toronto of the period. He must have felt compelled to dispel any hint that he was Jewish by denying it clearly and succinctly on the coupon.



French Cleaners, 1938. Blankenstein Family Heritage Centre, fonds 17, series 5-3, file 65.
Credit: Ontario Jewish Archives

A second document, an archival photograph from 1940, shows a sign below a larger roadside sign for cabin rentals that reads “Gentiles Only”. It would be difficult to find a more blatant example of systemic antisemitism than this. Such attitudes survived into the 1950s. The transformation of Toronto into a diverse cultural hub did not happen overnight, and when systemic antisemitism is clearly evidenced, it can take a long time to diminish. However, today such documents provide us with important insights into the attitude of an era, and can be used in conjunction with the recorded testimonies to demonstrate the continuing struggle for acceptance and equality that many of the Jewish displaced persons endured.



"Gentiles only" sign at forest Hill Lodge at Burleigh Falls, 18 January 1940. Blankenstein Family Heritage Centre, fonds 17, series 5-3, file 64, item 1.
Credit: Ontario Jewish Archives

Conclusion

The recorded testimonies of Holocaust survivors provide educators with a rich and powerful resource for teaching the Holocaust to English Language Learners. Through online materials such as the USC Shoah Foundation's iWitness platform, students can be guided through the process of acquiring and comprehending new vocabulary, and hearing the poignant narratives of Holocaust survivors starting life over in a new country. For more advanced learners, the testimonies offer a vista into the complexities of life in 1940s–1950s Canada, as well as powerful firsthand accounts of how individuals were affected by discriminatory attitudes and customs, while demonstrating how much Canadian civil society has changed.

Beyond these fundamental, educational elements, the recorded testimonies of Holocaust survivors are frequently the first time many ELLs and newcomers directly encounter the Holocaust as a historical event, and Judaism as a living religion. I occasionally encounter an instructor who is reticent to raise the topic of the Holocaust with their students for fear of encountering antisemitism. To those educators I say two things: first, that the power of the recorded testimony to touch hearts and minds in creating an empathic learning environment is almost unparalleled. Next, I share a powerful memory of the first session with newcomers that I conducted in Toronto. At the end of the class I was thanked profusely by a woman who told me that in her home country she could not learn about the Holocaust or about Judaism as it was a forbidden topic. The recorded testimonies had opened up a new world of learning for her and confirmed for me that some risks in education are worth taking.

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- 1 The term “newcomer” is used in the Canadian vernacular to refer to individuals who have recently arrived in Canada and are either on the road to citizenship or have completed the immigration process and have Canadian citizenship. It is considered somewhat old-fashioned and slightly pejorative to use terms such “immigrant”, “foreign-worker” or “migrant” in Canadian parlance. The term “newcomer” is used consistently on government, business and social service websites as well as print materials across Canada.
- 2 see <https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/teaching-guidelines>, accessed 19 September 2017.
- 3 see <https://sfi.usc.edu/iwatch>, accessed 19 September 2017.
- 4 For English instruction for newcomers, Canada uses the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) system whereby students progress from an introductory level 1 through to the advanced level 12. These correspond to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) used in many countries. The program described in this article was used with students at the B1 or Benchmark Five and higher.