

Using Witness Testimony from the Eichmann Trial in the Classroom¹

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In the recent Special Edition of *Teaching History*, Professor David Cesarani provides biographical information about Adolf Eichmann, whom he refers to as a ‘genocidaire.’² Cesarani’s conclusion that Eichmann decided to carry out his ideological mission with zeal has been well documented. According to Gabriel Bach, a member of the team that helped gather evidence in preparation for Eichmann’s trial, Eichmann repeatedly refused to grant exceptions to the rule vis-à-vis deporting Jewish people to their deaths.³ It appears that he never regretted his actions and indeed willingly ‘chose his genocidal vocation’.⁴ Although the recent 50th anniversary marking this epic trial provides teachers with an opportunity to explore the chasm of how human beings planned and carried out the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question”, the proceedings of this trial also allow educators to focus on the voices of the witnesses who gave testimony, approximately 16 years after liberation. During the Eichmann trial in 1961, Holocaust survivors were given an opportunity to not only look in the eyes of a high-ranking Nazi official, one who was responsible with his colleagues for carrying out the systematic genocide of the Jewish people, but also to openly recount the insurmountable circumstances and moral dilemmas they had faced on an everyday basis.⁵ The detailed and painful stories of individuals from all walks of life in Israeli society, often neighbours listening to neighbours for the very first time, created widespread empathy and significantly promoted Holocaust awareness.⁶ Therefore, archival footage from the Eichmann trial allows educators

to shed light on how Holocaust survivors mustered the courage to recount their difficult personal experiences and, in many cases, rebuild their lives.⁷

Over the last thirty years, there has been a major effort to collect Holocaust survivor testimonies.⁸ At the same time, the usage of Holocaust survivor testimony in the classroom has become a widely recognised and well-regarded educational tool.⁹ For instance, the Holocaust Educational Trust together with the USC Shoah Foundation Institute produced an educational resource based upon testimonies from this period, entitled *Recollections: Eyewitness Remember the Holocaust*.¹⁰ In addition, testimonies of witnesses from the Eichmann trial are easily accessible via the Yad Vashem website as well as others.¹¹ This short article focuses on putting this monumental trial in a pedagogical context, placing an emphasis on how issues raised during these judicial proceedings - especially through the testimony of one Holocaust survivor - can provide educators with windows of opportunity to discuss various Holocaust-related topics with students.¹² It also reflects upon the importance of the trial and the survivor witnesses for Israeli collective memory.

One of the most famous testimonies of the Eichmann trial is that of Holocaust survivor Yechiel Dinur, a writer until then known only by his pen-name, *Ka-tzetnik* (from *Ka tzet*, an abbreviation of the German for concentration camp).¹³ His testimony was given on 7 June 1961, approximately two months after the trial began. During this trial, Dinur's identity was revealed for the very first time. Prior to this public "unmasking", Dinur's books about the Holocaust had had a deep impact during the 1950s and beyond, especially on young people in Israel. The texts of Dinur do not spare his readers traumatic descriptions, harsh sexuality or violence, but rather submerge them into the depths of ultimate evil and depravity. Many Israelis have attested that they were exposed to the horrors of the Holocaust for the first time through his graphic depictions. On the one hand, some educational experts contend that Dinur's literature borders on pornography and

therefore discourage secondary school students from reading his works. On the other hand, some argue that by shedding light on the raw horror of the Holocaust, Dinur reminds his readers that the unimaginable became possible. An open debate in Israel continues concerning his Holocaust narratives and their usage in the classroom.¹⁴ In light of this situation, it is recommended that educators read for themselves the works of *Ka-tzetnik* before assigning any of them to their students as part of a Holocaust curriculum.

Dinur's presence on the witness stand - his physical appearance, subsequent collapse, and the need to eventually carry him out of the courtroom on a stretcher - was one of the most dramatic moments of the Eichmann trial, but it was not representative of what happened when most of the 110 witnesses took the stand in Jerusalem.¹⁵ After all, practically all of the Holocaust survivors who gave testimony during the four-month trial answered the questions posed to them by the chief prosecutor Gideon Hausner clearly and precisely, and did not lose consciousness.¹⁶

It is important to keep in mind that Dinur's testimony was preceded by other "dramatic moments". These included the secret operation to kidnap Eichmann in Argentina and the announcement of his capture in the Knesset (the Israeli parliament) by Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion on May 23, 1960; Hausner's well-known opening statement at the trial where he referred to his responsibility as the spokesperson in the name of six million victims;¹⁷ as well as Eichmann's banal appearance in the bulletproof glass booth during the proceedings. The fact that Eichmann looked like a mild-mannered gentleman in a suit, and not a monster in a SS uniform, also left many spectators in the Jerusalem courtroom aghast.

It should be noted that Dinur's cryptic trance on the witness stand, ending in collapse, had a profound effect on people not only in Israel but also around the

world.¹⁸ Following his description of what words cannot seem to express, Dinur's fainting shocked the nation even though this was not the first trial about the crimes of the Holocaust that had taken place. After all, a few years earlier, the proceedings of the trial of Rudolf Kastner had become part of the Israeli public discourse and the Nuremberg trials following the war had been well publicised. Nevertheless, it was the personal stories of the approximately 90 Holocaust survivors - including Dinur's disjointed words - that touched the hearts and minds of spectators in the courtroom and radio listeners across the country, and which were reported worldwide by the 600 international journalists covering the trial.¹⁹ During the Eichmann trial, an empathy with the survivors' pain and loss had thereby been forged.

For our purposes, Dinur's testimony raises some key questions and issues that secondary school teachers may wish to raise with their students. For example, Dinur states that:

'And the inhabitants of this planet had no names, they had no parents nor did they have children...they did not live - nor did they die - according to the laws of this world'

Clearly, a person's given name is a basic human right. By denying individuals their names, the perpetrators sought not only to dehumanize prisoners but also to erase their existence. As Dinur noted, the victims were denied burial as individuals with names on their tombstones.²⁰ However, in contrast to Dinur's suggestion, the 1.5 million Jewish children who were murdered during the Holocaust *did* have parents and were part of family units, and it is incumbent upon educators to present the lives of these children within the context of their pre-war communities and families - not only as corpses in killing pits or crematoria. In essence, Dinur's testimony can encourage educators to conduct research with their students about

the identities of Jewish children who lived during the Holocaust, including youths who kept diaries and were around their students' same age, such as Dawid Sierakowiak from Lodz and Yitzchak Rudashevski from Vilna.²¹

During his testimony, Dinur also recalled that:

'On the planet called Auschwitz...Time there was not like it is here on earth.
Every fraction of a minute there passed on a different scale of time'

From an educational angle, focusing on the issue of time opens many avenues of discussion with secondary school students. Dinur's words allow educators to explore how many Jewish people during the Holocaust desperately attempted to uphold their traditions and dignity by marking dates such as birthdays, rites of passage and Jewish holidays. Many testimonies and diaries from this period, especially those relating to daily life in the ghettos, describe this phenomenon. In Nazi concentration and extermination camps, adhering to a calendar became even more of a daily struggle. We know that some prisoners attempted to spiritually resist dehumanization by creating calendars from memory – simply in an effort to keep track of time. By focusing on testimonies that describe the efforts of Jewish prisoners to observe holidays and birthdays, educators thereby highlight the topic of spiritual resistance in their Holocaust-related lessons.²²

Dinur's well-known phrase, 'the planet called Auschwitz', has become part of the heritage of the Eichmann trial. Clearly, the Nazi concentration and extermination camps were not built on another planet but rather by human beings on earth in the heart of European culture. By emphasizing this point with their students, teachers can explore questions such as "how was it humanly possible for Nazi Germany and its collaborators to carry out this genocide?" By extension, teachers may wish to encourage their students to read sections of Gitta Sereny's book, *Into That Darkness*, based on her interviews with Franz Stangl, the Commandant of

Treblinka.²³ Teachers may also want to focus on Dinur's description of 'the planet called Auschwitz' when referring to photographs of Jewish people being selected for the gas chambers; or of German officers and women in the SS who, as they rest on lounge chairs, sing to the accompaniment of an accordion and eat blueberries, bear no signs of the emotions connected with the everyday criminal operation of Auschwitz-Birkenau and its sub camp system.²⁴

Dinur testified:

'If I am able to stand before you today... then I believe with perfect faith that this is due to the oath I swore to them there.... I see them, they are staring at me, I see them....'

On the stand, before his eyes, Dinur apparently saw the rows of victims waiting to enter the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau.²⁵ Their eyes apparently haunted him day and night. As we all know, as time passes fewer and fewer Holocaust survivors will be able to bear witness and tell students, "I see them" or "I saw them." Obviously, nothing can ultimately replace an encounter with a Holocaust survivor.²⁶ That said, the testimonies of Holocaust survivors at the Eichmann trial - as well as visual history testimonies relating to this period - do provide teachers with an opportunity to listen to survivors' personal stories as well as appreciate their positive spirit to rebuild their lives, establish families and contribute to the construction of a new democratic society - an educational message that continues to have universal meaning.

Survivors overall managed to "return to life" after the Holocaust, yet a few were incapable of overcoming their traumatic experiences after the war such as Yechiel Dinur, a.k.a., *Ka-tzetnik*. Even though Dinur appeared to be on the verge of being catatonic on the witness stand during the Eichmann trial, his words probe our thinking skills about the depths of human behaviour and thereby serve as a trigger

for further discussion and research with secondary school students when studying about Holocaust-related subjects.

REFERENCES

¹ This article is based on a lecture that was given in the framework of an international conference on the Heritage of War in Amsterdam on September 16, 2010, supported by the Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport. The author would like to thank Shulamit Imber for her suggestions and comments on an earlier version of this paper as well as Dorit Novak for her support.

² Cesarani, D. (2010) 'Polychronicon: Adolf Eichmann: The Making of a Genocidaire' in Burn, K., Chapman, A., Counsell, C. (eds.), *Teaching History*, 141, pp. 40-41.

³ Lecture by Bach, G. delivered at Yad Vashem, 21 February 2011.

⁴ Cesarani, *op.cit.*, p. 41.

⁵ It appears that one of the clear aims of The Eichmann Trial in Jerusalem was to "educate" Israeli society, especially the younger generation, about what had happened during the Holocaust. For example, David Ben Gurion, then Prime Minister of Israel, alluded to this goal of the trial from his standpoint in his correspondence in the early 1960s. For additional information on this aspect, see Segev, T. (1993) *The Seventh Million*, New York: Hill and Wang, p. 327.

⁶ See Rozett, R & Shmuel Spector, S (eds.) (2000) *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, Jerusalem: Facts on File, p. 200. This trial was essentially the first time Jewish victims, in their national homeland, became publicly vocal and widely visible. The myth that Holocaust survivors were silent shortly after the war is simply inaccurate. After the war, the majority of Holocaust survivors in Israel often preferred to speak to each other or in the framework of communal gatherings rather in the public sphere. They coordinated remembrance ceremonies within their communities from the very beginning, even before statehood. However, essentially these circles were "islands of speech," until the trial began in Spring 1961.

⁷ See Gouri, H. (1962) *Facing the Glass Booth: the Jerusalem Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, Detroit: Wayne State University.

⁸ For example, the collection of the USC Shoah Foundation Institute in Los Angeles, California, includes more than 50,000 witness testimonies relating to the Holocaust period. See: <http://dornsife.usc.edu/vhi/?gclid=CLmWjOmS2agCFQoa4QodHRNGAA>

⁹ See Education Working Group Paper 'Teaching the Holocaust Without Survivors', Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, available via: http://www.holocausttaskforce.org/images/itf_data/EWG_Teaching_the_Holocaust_without_Survivors_copy.pdf

As is noted, the testimony of Holocaust survivors 'of course, must be integrated into the curricula and placed in its historical context as part of the historical narrative and supported by adequate documentation. Students must be prepared with the context prior to viewing the testimony and given the opportunity to reflect on it afterwards'.

¹⁰ *Recollections: Eyewitnesses Remember the Holocaust* has been jointly developed by the Holocaust Educational Trust and the USC Shoah Foundation Institute. For more information about this educational resource, see: <http://www.het.org.uk/education-resources-item01.html>. Another recent initiative in this field is the USC Shoah Foundation Institute's IWitness website which allows students and educators to access an array of video testimonies.

¹¹ See the following websites:

www.yadvashem.org

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005179#related>

A DVD highlighting specific clips from the Eichmann trial was also developed for classroom use by the Israel State Archives, Yad Vashem and the Steven Spielberg Jewish Film Archive at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

¹² In May 1960, Eichmann was captured in Argentina and brought to Israel to stand trial under the Nazi and Nazi Collaborators (Punishment) Law of 1950. He was indicted on fifteen counts,

including crimes against the Jewish people, crimes against humanity, war crimes and membership in various criminal organizations, including the SS, SD and Gestapo. The charges against Eichmann also included crimes against Poles, Slovenes, Roma and Czechs. On December 15, 1961, Adolf Eichmann was sentenced to death. His request for clemency was turned down, and he was hanged in the Ramleh prison between May 31- June 1, 1962. His body was cremated and the ashes were scattered at sea, outside of Israel's territorial waters.

¹³ *Ka-tzetnik* is an abbreviation for KZ, *Konzentrationslager*.

¹⁴ Glasner-Heled, G. (2007) "Reader, Writer and Holocaust Literature: The Case of Ka-Tzetnik," *Israel Studies*, 12 (3) pp. 109-133. For more information about the books that Dinur published, and the translations of his works into numerous foreign languages, see:

http://www.ithl.org.il/author_info.asp?id=73

The author would like to thank Yiftach Ashkenazy for drawing my attention to this article and useful database of the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature.

¹⁵ Dinur's appearance can be viewed via The Eichmann Trial channel created by Yad Vashem on YouTube, available via: <http://www.youtube.com/user/EichmannTrialEN#p/c/39/m3-tXyYhd5U>

¹⁶ Dinur is the only survivor who passed out on the stand during this trial. Rozett, R. & Spector, S (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 199.

¹⁷ According to Gideon Hausner's opening statement at the Eichmann trial on April 10, 1961, 'When I stand before you here, Judges of Israel, to lead the Prosecution of Adolf Eichmann, I am not standing alone. With me are six million accusers. But they cannot rise to their feet and point an accusing finger towards him who sits in the dock and cry: 'I accuse.'" For their ashes are piled up on the hills of Auschwitz and the fields of Treblinka, and are strewn in the forests of Poland. Their graves are scattered throughout the length and breadth of Europe. Their blood cries out, but their voice is not heard. Therefore, I will be their spokesperson and in their name, I will unfold the awesome indictment.'" See Mendes-Flohr, P. R. & Reinharz, J. (1980) *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 521-523.

¹⁸ See Presser, J. (2010) *Ashes in the Wind: The Destruction of Dutch Jewry*, London: Souvenir Press. In this monumental work Presser interweaves Holocaust survivor testimony into his historical chronicle of the Holocaust in the Netherlands. The testimony of Greet van Amstel's testimony (p. 494) in many ways echoes Dinur's words at the Eichmann trial.

¹⁹ During the proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Holocaust Education at Yad Vashem in July 2008, Professor Hanna Yablonka emphasized this point. See: <http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/conference/2008/video3.asp>

²⁰ Since Jewish victims' names and identities were obliterated during the Holocaust, it has become a colossal educational project to restore them. Since its establishment, Yad Vashem has been engaged in this mission. The name Yad Vashem has been taken from a biblical passage, Isaiah, Chapter 56, Verse 5, "And to them will I give in my house and within my walls a memorial and a name (a "*Yad Vashem*")... that shall not be cut off." Established in 1953, one of Yad Vashem's main tasks in the early years (approximately a decade prior to the Eichmann trial) was to collect the names of Jewish victims who were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators, known as Pages of Testimony. Pages of Testimony continue to be filled in and processed to this very day. Approximately three million Pages of Testimony have been collected thus far by Yad Vashem and this names database has been digitized and may be found on its website.

²¹ For educational material on Rudashevski and other young people who lived during this period, see Boas, J. (1995) *We Are Witnesses: Five Diaries of Teenagers Who Died in the Holocaust*, New York: Scholastic.

²² For example, see Rabbi Sinai Adler's recollections about celebrating Jewish holidays in Nazi camps at:

<http://clickit3.ort.org.il/Apps/WW/page.aspx?ws=496fe4b2-4d9a-4c28-a845-510b28bie44b&page=5d675d48-68df-4fc3-833c-04a23648f70e&fol=fe71099d-270f-4c68-8def->

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²³ Sereny, G. (1974) *Into That Darkness: An Examination of Conscience*, New York: Vintage Books.

²⁴ The photo album found by Lili Jacob at the end of the war, known as the Auschwitz Album, may be found at www.yadvashem.org. Other related photographs of SS personnel in Auschwitz, and their recreation activities recorded outside of the camp, may be found at: www.ushmm.org. Additional information and photographs may be found on the official website of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum.

²⁵ An obituary of Dinur may be found at:

<http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/author-and-auschwitz-survivor-yehiel-dinur-dies-of-cancer-at-84-1.64877>

²⁶ Students and educators in Israel have often indicated that meeting a survivor strengthened their personal commitment to study and preserve the memory of the Holocaust. This finding is based upon the research undertaken by Dr. Erik Cohen, Bar Ilan University, and may be found at:

http://www.holocausttaskforce.org/images/itf_data/documents/o3_member_states/israel/shoah_education_in%20israeli_state_schools.pdf