

**Handout**

# Survivors and Memory Jigsaw

## “Expert” Group Reading A: Sonia Weitz

**Directions:** Read aloud the following testimony from a Holocaust survivor. Then, on your own, choose one sentence that stands out for you and underline it. In your journal, explain why this sentence stands out for you. You will be sharing your ideas with your group and then discussing the question at the bottom of the page together.

In the years immediately after the war, many Holocaust survivors struggled to tell their stories and to feel heard. Sonia Weitz describes how she began to talk about her Holocaust experiences years after her emigration to the United States:

I was nineteen years old when I began a new life in the United States. At that time, most Americans did not want to hear about the experiences of Holocaust survivors. (The word Holocaust was not even part of the vocabulary.) And most survivors did not have the will to talk about it, except among themselves. When some of us did break the silence and speak out, no one truly listened. Later, much later, some did listen, but very few heard. And so, in the beginning, I did not speak out. I concentrated, instead, on building a normal life. But what constituted a “normal life” to a survivor of the Holocaust? The young people I met in 1948 came from another world. They had grown up with their families, lived in houses, slept in beds, eaten three meals a day, and gone to school. I, on the other hand, had been starved and brutalized . . . During the 1950s and 1960s, I lived my life in much the same way as other American wives and mothers, at least to outward appearances. My inner world, however, differed dramatically. Over and over again, I heard my mother’s final words to me, “Remember to tell the world.” But how was I to do this? How was I to tell a world that did not want to listen? How was I to speak of the unspeakable—words that I myself did not want to hear? . . .<sup>1</sup>

**“Expert” Group Discussion Question:** What does Sonia Weitz’s testimony suggest about how the experience of living through the Holocaust shaped her identity and sense of responsibility?

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<sup>1</sup> Sonia Schreiber Weitz, *I Promised I Would Tell* (Brookline, MA: Facing History and Ourselves, Inc., 2012), 87.

## “Expert” Group Reading B: Eva Hoffman

**Directions:** Read aloud the following testimony from the daughter of Holocaust survivors with your group. Then, on your own, choose one sentence that stands out for you and underline it. In your journal, explain why this sentence stands out for you. You will be sharing your ideas with your group and then discussing the question at the bottom of the page together.

Survivors handed down their personal histories to their children and grandchildren, in ways that were planned and in ways that were unplanned. Old photos of unknown family members, a mother’s insistence that her children always finish their dinner, a tattooed number glimpsed on a grandfather’s arm—these were some of the ways that survivors’ descendants gained awareness of their family history.

Author Eva Hoffman was born in Poland just after World War II ended, to parents who had survived the Holocaust. She writes:

In my home, as in so many others, the past broke through in the sounds of nightmares, the idiom of sighs and illness, of tears and the acute aches that were the legacy of the damp attic and of the conditions my parents endured during their hiding . . .

Many others who grew up in households like mine remember the torn, incoherent character of those first communications about the Holocaust, the speech broken under the pressure of pain . . . For it was precisely the indigestibility of these utterances, their fearful weight of densely packed feeling, as much as any specific content, that I took in as a child. The fragmentary phrases lodged themselves in my mind like shards, like the deadly needles I remember from certain fairy tales, which pricked your flesh and could never be extracted again.<sup>2</sup>

**Group Discussion Question:** What does Eva Hoffman’s testimony suggest about how being the descendant of Holocaust survivors shaped her identity and the identity of other descendants like her?

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<sup>2</sup> Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (Perseus Books, 2004), 9–11.

## “Expert” Group Reading C: Sara Greenberg

**Directions:** Read aloud the following testimony from the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors with your group. Then, on your own, choose one sentence that stands out for you and underline it. In your journal, explain why this sentence stands out for you. You will be sharing your ideas with your group and then discussing the question at the bottom of the page together.

This emotional legacy of a parent’s trauma could be a burden for family members. Sara Greenberg, the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, describes how it could also be a treasured inheritance:

A family’s history will echo from generation to generation as stories from the past are retold. My grandparents are survivors of the Holocaust . . . As a young child I had always noticed the number on my grandfather’s arm. What did it mean? Why didn’t other grandparents have a number? . . . It was important to him that I understand and that I learn from his story . . .

I have heard and told my grandfather’s story numerous times. I have vowed to never forget his story. But watching my grandfather address a group of Israeli soldiers, his heroes, in [Auschwitz], a place where over a million Jews were annihilated, his story suddenly took on a new meaning. As the last living link to survivors of Auschwitz and the Holocaust, it is my generation’s responsibility to tell the story of our grandparents. No other generation can ever touch a forearm branded with a numbered tattoo. No other generation can ever walk through the barracks of Auschwitz personally accompanied by stories of what it looked like, what it smelled like. We, the third generation, have the obligation to transmit our grandparents’ stories to the world and to future generations. May we never forget.<sup>3</sup>

**Group Discussion Question:** What does Sara Greenberg’s testimony suggest about how being the descendant of Holocaust survivors shaped her identity and sense of responsibility?

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<sup>3</sup> B-2247: *A Granddaughter’s Understanding* (short film, 2012), directed by Sara Greenberg, [www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org).

## “Expert” Group Reading D: Sara Cohan

**Directions:** Read aloud the following testimony from the granddaughter of an Armenian Genocide survivor with your group. Then, on your own, choose one sentence that stands out for you and underline it. In your journal, explain why this sentence stands out for you. You will be sharing your ideas with your group and then discussing the question at the bottom of the page together.

Sara Cohan, a teacher, has struggled with her relationship to Armenia and Armenian identity. She writes: “I do not practice the religion, speak the language, I am not directly from Armenia, and I only take part in a few of the traditions.” While visiting an Armenian school in California, those issues came to a head when a student at the school asked: “How is it again that you are Armenian?” Cohan shared her reflections on the student’s question:

I am proud of my grandfather because he survived a genocide and was successful in his life. He started a family and was a psychiatrist trained at the American University of Beirut. He eventually helped establish the school of psychiatry at the University of Tennessee. At the same time, I mourn the loss of a lineage—sixty-nine members of my family perished in the genocide and only seven lived. There are approximately 6.1 billion people in the world and approximately 8 million Armenians. Most are in Diaspora and disappearing quickly. What my ancestors have accomplished and endured is worthy of remembrance and respect. With so few Armenians left in the world each one needs to do as much as s/he can to teach others about Armenians and the Genocide.

Recently, I saw *The Official Story*, a movie about the Disappeared in Argentina. In the beginning of the film the main character is teaching a history course in a high school. She tells the class: “No people can survive without memory. History is the memory of the people.” When I heard those lines I finally knew how I could answer the young girl who asked how I was Armenian: I was born a descendant of Armenians and I am Armenian because my love for my grandfather has inspired me to learn about Armenian history and the history of the Genocide. I am Armenian because I will never forget my family’s history and, as long as I remember, Armenians will survive.

**Group Discussion Question:** What does Sara Cohan’s testimony suggest about how being the descendant of an Armenian Genocide survivor shaped her identity and sense of responsibility?

## "Teaching" Group Discussion Questions

**Directions:** Each student in your new group should *briefly* summarize their testimony by explaining whose story is represented, what stood out for you, and how your "expert" group answered the discussion question. Then, using examples from your readings, this unit, and your own experiences, discuss the following questions together.

1. What has made the survivors and descendants decide to share their stories and the stories of their family members?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What can we learn from the stories of survivors of the Holocaust, other genocides, and mass atrocities that occurred since the 1940s?
  - a. How might these stories help us to better understand those moments of history?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - b. How might they help us to better understand human behavior?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - c. How might they help us to better understand our world today?