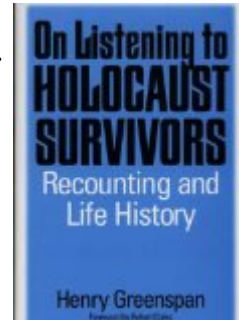




**Henry Greenspan.** *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History.* Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998. xx + 199 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-275-95718-6.



**Reviewed by** Linda M. Woolf

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Most individuals give little thought to the process of communication and instead rely on cultural assumptions about discourse to guide their day to day interactions. However, the recountings of Holocaust survivors may not always fit within the parameters of these assumptions. Left unchallenged, these assumptions only serve to mute the messages contained in Holocaust survivor's lives and recountings. Psychologist Henry Greenspan, in his book, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors*, discusses the context, means, and variety of forms used by survivors to convey their life experiences. And throughout this discussion, he encourages us all to become more sensitively engaged in dialogue with survivors of the Holocaust.

Greenspan begins by differentiating between the concepts of retelling and recounting. To retell a story implies a beginning, a middle and an end. The pieces of the tale are available to the both the teller of the story and the listener. For Jews, the story of the Exodus from Egypt, the miracle of Hanukkah, and the Purim tale involving Esther represent such retellings. The element of each tale is visible, organized, and invites the listener along

a path towards redemption and freedom. However, the experience of the Holocaust does not lend itself to traditional forms of retelling. Much is unspeakable, fragmented, or fleetingly visible. According to Greenspan, one can not simply retell the Holocaust. Rather, he argues that survivors recount their experiences of the Holocaust through a variety of forms including the expression of their current lives. To truly hear Holocaust survivors, we need to listen differently and to be engaged in an interactive process.

Several major premises become apparent when reading the text and each is well supported by Holocaust survivor oral histories and writings. First, Greenspan argues that we need to listen to each Holocaust survivor over time. During an initial encounter, we are only privy to the survivor's first presentation of their life's story. It represents principally a beginning rather than an end. Often times, the initial encounter is shaped by the survivor's anticipation of what the listener expects to hear. Only over time, can we begin to move beyond the compromise of perceived acceptable recounting. Only through extended dialogue do we

begin to see patterns, repeated shifts, breaks and silences, paradox and contradictions, recurrent analogies and metaphors, and glimpses of the unspeakable. Greenspan describes survivors as speaking with "compound voices" (p. 17) and only over time can one begin to see the pattern of this mosaic.

Second, Greenspan proposes that individuals must look beyond words which concern specific Holocaust events to truly understand Holocaust survivor's recountings. He argues that we need to listen to survivor's stories of their pre-Holocaust life as well as their present life. The survivor's pre-Holocaust life provided a framework shaping their Holocaust experiences. The survivor's current day-to-day existence provides the context from which they recount their Holocaust experiences. Descriptions of life during the Holocaust and life outside the Holocaust years may begin to intermingle. Greenspan describes one survivor for whom the image of the current ghetto where he chooses to maintain his small business exists as a living metaphor for another ghetto--distinctions exist but they remain blurred distinctions. Thus, an individual's current life serves as a reflection of their entire life history. At times, this reflection may provide messages perhaps otherwise unspeakable. Only by attending to what is being said about today can we hear the unspeakable message about the past. Additionally, to understand the meaning of life surrounded in death during the Holocaust, we must also examine how that death remains in the midst of current life. Thus, what may be viewed by some as psychiatric symptoms resulting from Holocaust atrocities may perhaps be better viewed as another form of recounting. Through all of this, the survivor's life becomes a text--a form of recounting.

Greenspan also suggests that individuals need to engage in dialogue with many survivors if they want to learn of the Holocaust. No single survivor alone can communicate all that was the Holocaust--much like, Auschwitz does not represent all

that was the Holocaust. However, through engaged dialogue with many survivors, an individual can begin to see some of the patterns of the Holocaust. Over time, strands of commonality begin to appear between survivors' recountings which run parallel to the unique strands for the individual survivor. Only through sympathetic dialogue and listening to a range of voices over time can the cacophony of the Holocaust begin to be perceived.

Finally, Greenspan asserts that we need to examine who we are as listeners. Do we really seek to hear the voice of the Holocaust survivor? For many years, survivors' voices were silenced. In recent years, this trend has reversed. We honor the survivor and rightly so. However for some, the act of listening to survivor testimony or hearing a survivor bear witness has become more important than what is said, what happened, what was and is reality. Instead of truly listening to survivors, the "listener" simply perceives the survivor as either a heroic symbol telling a tale of triumphant survival or a collection of psychiatric symptoms resulting from atrocity. Both perceptions result in distancing and stereotyping and thus leave the survivor's recounting unheard.

Through each of the discussions above, serious questions are raised concerning current approaches to listening to Holocaust survivors. These questions are raised both in regards to Holocaust education and the preservation of Holocaust survivors's testimony. In regards to Holocaust education, it becomes clear that a single, brief presentation by a Holocaust survivor only begins the process of dialogue. Students need to engage in dialogue with survivors who, singularly or collectively, discuss various aspects of their lives from pre-Holocaust to the present. Only through such sustained dialogue will students begin to see Holocaust survivors as unique individuals and begin to understand the Holocaust in all of its complexity.

With the increasing drive to collect Holocaust testimony, Greenspan's book takes on a special significance. Greenspan raises questions concerning the methods used to gather testimony and the expectations concerning the value of these collections. Should we strive to collect brief accounting of events from as many survivors as possible? And if we do, what are we losing in the process? Clearly, what is needed is a gathering of oral histories encompassing all forms of survivor testimony including sustained dialogue.

In the second half of the book, Greenspan introduces the reader to seven survivors. Through his description of dialogue, he provides the reader with examples to illustrate the many forms of communication, understanding, and listening. He begins by describing six survivors and images of their lives before, during, and after the Holocaust. We see the complexity of their lives: the patterns, the contradictions, and the analogies. We see the different goals they have regarding recounting and how that too reflects the pattern of their lives. We see the strands of similarity between these survivors as well as the differences. We are left with questions that could only be explored through further dialogue.

Greenspan then takes us on a deeper journey into the life of one survivor. This journey makes clear the richness contained in sustained dialogue with one individual over time. We begin to increasingly see the survivor as an individual and not just a symbolic representation of the Holocaust. And perhaps, this is the ultimate point underlying Greenspan's book. There is no need for a ritualized relationship between survivors and listeners. As Greenspan states, "For the sufficient reason to listen to survivors is to listen to survivors. No other purpose is required" (p. 171).

*On Listening to Holocaust Survivors* contains a wealth of information, ideas, and thoughts. Throughout the text, Greenspan weaves together his ideas concerning survivor's recountings with examples from his extensive experience inter-

viewing Holocaust survivors. There is an incredible diversity and depth to the text. The ideas presented above represent some of the major themes but are by no means the only ideas presented. Most likely, individuals will reread the text and discover new meanings as they engage in dialogue with survivors.

Unfortunately, it should be mentioned that the writing style and organization of the text make it, at times, difficult to read. Greenspan's writing can be very poetic but this often occurs at the expense of clarity. Occasionally, sentences contain multiple complex ideas strung together leaving the reader unclear as to the overall point. In addition to being a psychologist, Greenspan is also playwright. Ironically, the meaning behind some phrases is best perceived if one reads the text as if they were reading it aloud. Organizationally, examples drawn from survivor's lives presented in the first half of the book are better understood after being introduced to the survivors in the second half of the book. It should be noted that much of the organizational difficulty may also simply reflect the organization complexity inherent in human dialogue and existence. However, these difficulties pale against the overall message and rich texture of the book.

Finally, while Greenspan is a psychoanalytic psychologist, the reader need not worry about being confronted with psychoanalytic terms or theory. The text is free of professional terminology. Much of what he writes, however, could easily be supported by both the psychoanalytic and psychological research literature. This is most notable in the areas of oral history methodologies, social cognition, and life review/reminiscence. The book however, is not written simply for scholars within these disciplines. Rather, it is written for and should be read by anyone concerned with the voices of Holocaust survivors.

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