

WHAT WILL BECOME OF ALL THE *Memories?*

Transmitting the Tragedy of the Holocaust to the Next Generation

By Malkie Schulman

The first personal contact Tova Rosenberg, creator of Names, Not Numbers, Inc. – Holocaust Oral History Film Documentary project, had with a Holocaust survivor was when she met family members for the first time in Israel.

"I come from St. Louis and there weren't too many survivors there when I was growing up," Tova shares. "Certainly, no one that I knew had a number on their arm."

Tova majored in European History, and as part of her graduate studies at Hebrew University, she studied the Holocaust era with renowned Holocaust scholar, Professor Yehuda Bauer. This was her first in-depth exposure to the Holocaust.

Upon finishing her degrees, Rosenberg became an Adjunct Lecturer at a College of Education in Israel and trained Israeli teachers to teach in the Jewish Educational systems in the Diaspora. Tova had been a Day School principal and is currently Director of Hebrew Language and Special Programs at Yeshiva University High School for Boys in New York. Over the years, she has constantly sought experiential projects that would leave a mark on students and motivate them to want to learn, whatever the subject, not necessarily the Holocaust.

Tova's quest for hands-on learning became focused on Holocaust studies 19 years ago when, as principal in a Central Pennsylvania Day School, she received a letter from the State inviting her school to apply for an intergenerational grant.

"That was when the idea for an experiential Holocaust documentary project first came into my mind," Tova says. "On my faculty, I had a computer teacher who made film documentaries."

These two factors – the funding and expertise – were the catalyst for Tova's vision of first-hand learning through having students personally interview Holocaust survivors and then produce an oral history film documentary about it.



Thus began the Names, Not Numbers, Inc. project. For nearly 20 years now, together with husband, Dov Rosenberg, Tova has been actively spreading her worthy work throughout the U.S., Canada, and Israel.

BEQUEATHING MEMORIES

Shockingly, in a 2019 study, polls showed that 66% of Millennials could not identify Auschwitz as a concentration/death camp and 31% of all Americans

believe that 2 million Jews or fewer were killed in the Holocaust.

In the famous words of George Santayana in *The Life of Reason*, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Names, Not Numbers is about educating today's youth about what happened in the Holocaust, in all its horrific detail, so that the world community will remember and make sure it never happens again.

"Our strongest hopes," shares Tova, "especially,



Tova Rosenberg



lay in our youth because they are tomorrow's leaders. They are the ones who can be inspired to stand up to and act against oppression and ultimately act forcefully to prevent prejudice, hatred, anti-Semitism and further attempts at genocide."

Names, Not Numbers offers an integrated, multi-disciplinary curriculum, combining research, specialized interviewing techniques, documentary film tools, and editing. Throughout the project, the selected students work with professionals – journalists, newspaper editors, filmmakers, and Holocaust scholars.

"Our program," Tova explains, "is furnishing young people with the proper tools to succeed in education and in life. These are the tools of effective journalism, film capture and portrayal, and tools of interviewing and meaningful research."

Names, Not Numbers is a project which bequeaths the memories, stories, and lessons of the Holocaust to students and inspires future generations to combat anti-Semitism and all forms of hatred and intolerance.

Rabbi Yoni Fein, Head of School at Brauser Maimonides Academy in Hollywood, Florida, is an enthusiastic proponent of the program. He comments on the many ways his students have gained from the project.

"The students learned new skills, connected disciplines, learned about themselves and their heritage, connected that history to their world, and took on global responsibility. All the while, they built relationships with survivors and learned to capture perspective and articulate a point of view."

Students, educators, and survivors who have participated in this program remark on the title – Names, Not Numbers. Each Holocaust victim, they say, were entire worlds before the Nazis attempted to reduce them to mere numbers. As one Holocaust scholar commented in a lecture to participating students, "The number six million means nothing to me. It only means something when I see it as the number one – six.... million... times."

Tova points out, "The interviews with the Holo-

caust survivors show that we honor their stories, as well as value the importance of passing them down to the future generations."

Academic book learning cannot be compared to experiential, hands-on learning, especially when dealing with a topic like the Holocaust. Virtually every student walks out of their interview session with the survivor a different person. Through speaking to and hearing the stories directly from the survivor, they have now become the closest you can get to knowledge of what went on during those years. They know that and feel that in the deepest sense.

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to the witnesses,' to carry on the legacy. We want them to clearly understand that wars do not begin with guns; they begin with words," maintains Tova.

Through the interview process, the students learn where hateful words can lead and why it's so important not to allow hate to flourish. They learn how damaging it can be to keep silent when vicious words and actions are exchanged. They learn the truth of Winston Churchill's remonstrance: "The only thing necessary for evil to triumph in the world is that good men do nothing."

A SHARED HISTORY

There are a number of phases to the program,

shares Tova.

"One of the preliminary steps is reaching out to survivors to explain the project to them and ask if they're interested in participating. If they are interested, we ask them to send us a short bio about their life before, during, and after the war. The next part of the program consists of prepping the students. Each school offers sessions about the timeline of the Holocaust and historical detail of this era."

Concurrent to the history lessons, the students are learning how to conduct an oral history interview and how to produce a documentary. In fact, two documentaries are being produced simultaneously. One is of the survivor's story and the other one is the students' testimonials both before and after the survivor interview.

"From day one," says Tova, "we are interviewing the students to obtain their insights and reflections. We ask them what they are learning from the project and what they want to do with their newfound knowledge in the future."

In the oral history documentary, the viewers only see and hear the interviewee. They don't see the student interviewer, and they don't even hear the questions that the interviewer is asking. This means that the interview questions must be phrased in a way that the viewer will understand the interviewee's response without knowing what the question was. The student interviewer learns to elicit the survivor's story without using names they wish the survivor to use.

The students are learning history through the people who have lived through it. They learn about life before the war. The idea is to get the survivor's memories activated from 80 years ago (or more).

"To obtain a complete and accurate picture of what happened to them during the war, we have to know what they lost from before the war," shares Tova.

Tova will often encourage the students to ask the survivor to describe their Pesach seder before the war. Recalling happy occasions with family members is a great way to jog the memory. Discussing the Pesach



Tova helping a student prepare for the interview

seder accomplishes both. *Where did your grandfather sit at the table? Where did your grandmother sit? What food was served?* The survivor will visualize his relatives at the table, he will smell the food being served. *What melodies did you sing? Can you sing it for me?*

"The stories and memories these survivors share are priceless," contends Tova. "In one interview, I recall," continues Tova, "a student asked the survivor what his favorite subject in school was. He answered that he did not like parshat hashavua. 'What did you do then during the lesson?' the student asked. 'I drew pictures of the parsha that my rebbe was discussing.' Later on, in the interview when the survivor shared his experience leaving on the Kindertransport, the student asked, 'What did you take in your suitcase with you?' 'My drawings from parsha class,' the survivor answered. After the war, the survivor went to New York. 'What did you bring with you to New York?' asked the student. 'My parsha drawings from cheder.'"

Another interviewee brought her doll with her to Theresienstadt (concentration camp). Her doll made it through all the war years and today resides in a glass case in a Washington, D.C., museum. Often the survivors bring pictures and artifacts to the interview.

"The students are mesmerized," says Tova. "History becomes alive. It's not just a picture in a book. They understand that they're sitting across from heroes who lived through this historical period."

Tova admits that all the stories mesmerize and inspire her as well. Personally, she shares that one of her most inspiring stories was when, at the end

of an interview, the student asked a Polish survivor of various concentration camps from 1939 to 1945 what he did on the day he was liberated. The survivor responded, "I went to a movie." The eighth grade interviewer was astute and understood what he had been taught that as a good journalist, his job was to follow up on interesting comments of the interviewee even if he hadn't prepared for it. So, he pressed

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further and asked, "What movie did you see?" And "why did you choose to go to a movie?" The survivor responded that before the war his favorite activity was going to a movie so now that the war was over, that's what he wanted to do.

"This survivor went through hell from the very beginning of the war to the very end of the war," shares Tova, "yet he hadn't lost his *joie de vivre*, and at the first opportunity to do what he liked best, he did."

An important question the student will ask a survivor is – "What is your message to my generation?" Every survivor, of course, will have a different response. Some will say, "Your job is to teach the world (about what happened)." Another will say, "Philanthropy is the most important, to give back to the Jewish world."

It's interesting to note, observes Tova, that about one-fifth of the students participating in this project are not even Jewish. Nevertheless, the participating public, private or Catholic schools feel strongly that children from all walks of life learn about the Holocaust and get a chance to speak to a survivor. In the words of Mr. David Abbott, principal of BELL Academy in Queens, NY, "The question we, as educators, often ask ourselves is how we can engage students in such controversial topics of hate, discrimination, and racism. One thing we can say for certain is that ignoring the past, and not confronting the painful realities of today, will only permit feelings and attitudes fueled by hate, to flourish. We need to empower, we need to educate, and programs like Names, Not Numbers is an effective way to engage our students in experiential learning on such important issues."

Steven Spielberg, Academy Award Winning Director, agrees. Speaking to the students at Manhattan Day School in New York, he notes, "I'm inspired by these students in their outreach and compassion. Together with the survivors, each one has become a teacher of history that must be remembered. It is also so gratifying that you – in your own way – have shown us that this and future generations will not stand aside when they have a chance to tell a story that can make a difference for the good of all of us."

The other participants of the Names, Not Numbers project are students in day schools and JCCs of all affiliations across Canada, the United States, and Israel. Occasionally, a public school will collaborate with a day school on the project.

"I find it particularly inspiring," shares Tova, "to see minority students in public schools so involved in a Holocaust project."

After the interviews are finished, there is a final community event to showcase the work that was done by the survivors and the students. The students talk about what they've learned from their experience, and they present the survivors with a gift. Hugs are exchanged and pictures are taken together.

"I love watching the intergenerational connection that's been formed," says Tova.

Besides for the warmth and love that's in the room at the final event, sometimes there are surprises as well.

"We have had more than once that two survivors at the final event will discover after watching the documentary and hearing other survivors' stories that they were in the same concentration camp or on the same ship coming together to the United States. That will also be very moving," she shares.

"At one event," she continues, "a group of students interviewed a man who had liberated Buchenwald concentration camp. Another interviewee, a survivor of Buchenwald, was present at the final event. He stood in front of the audience and read aloud a poem in which he thanked the liberator for what he had done.

"Now that was an incredibly emotional moment!"

A TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

Initially, at the advent of the project, the students may experience trepidation. Many have never met a survivor before, and they've certainly never produced a documentary, so their concerns are quite normal, maintains Tova.

Another important aspect of the interview and something the students are concerned about is what to do if either they get overwhelmed by the stories and/or the survivor breaks down in the retelling.

"In our experience," Tova discloses, "the students usually remain calm, but sometimes a survivor will break down and then we teach the student to pause, wait and show empathy before moving on. We also explain to the students that if the survivor breaks down, it's not because of something they said/did wrong; it's just from the pain of re-living their story."

Which, of course, begs the next question. Why would any survivor be interested in being part of a project like this?

"In fact, most of the survivors we speak to are very interested in sharing their story," says Tova. "But it wasn't like that 19 years ago when we started this project. Now, the survivors are cognizant of the fact that they're the last generation of survivors, and if they don't pass on their story, who will? Today, telling their story has become a mission for them. They understand that they are passing the torch to these kids."

As one Holocaust survivor poignantly commented, "My voice is fading and soon will be heard no more; it's up to you kids to make sure the world does not forget."

Nevertheless, often it comes with a price to pay. Some survivors share that after the interview, they have a week of sleepless nights because of nightmares they experience.

"We find that both for the survivors and the students, the experience is transformative," says Tova. "The survivors just want to hug the kids and the kids feel the same. After the interview, the survivors view the students like their own children. It's no longer just their personal family that is telling their story but their 'new' children as well."

Chaim Weiser, a Holocaust survivor, wrote after the final event, "I am forever grateful for being chosen alongside such distinguished guests. Not a day goes by that I don't cherish the wonderful experience. I cannot imagine a more urgent undertaking that will



perpetuate to the world the memory of the great tragedy that befell the Jewish people."

Tova will direct the project coordinators to tell the students from every group to call and wish the survivor a good Shabbos every Friday even if the survivor is not religious. Before holidays, Tova will also encourage the participants to call. Sometimes, she shares, they hear that the survivor receives food through the Meals on Wheels program, and they ask if they can be the ones to deliver it. If a survivor passes away soon after an interview, the students will pay a shiva call.

One recurring theme is the awe the students feel for the survivor that after all they've gone through, they can still be happy.

"And a comment we hear over and over," shares Tova, "is the feeling of how can we complain about anything? Our problems are so trivial compared to what these people have gone through. There's more of a sense of being grateful for their lives, even with all its imperfection."

Truth to tell, admits Tova, she is also in awe of these heroes. Every survivor has an inspiring story to tell, she claims, but the fact that they can pick up their lives and move forward is truly awe-inspiring.

Perhaps more than anything, though, is the sense of inspiration and motivation these young adults feel now that they so deeply understand what apathy and silence can do to humanity when morality goes astray. The memories of the survivors, their stories and lessons of the Holocaust inspire the students to strive to combat anti-Semitism and all forms of hatred and intolerance.

At the culminating event for a public high school in Miami, one of the students spoke to the audience and said: "Understanding history, respect for humanity and intolerance of hate are timeless lessons. We are grateful to have had the opportunity to learn directly from living survivors. As young students and the future leaders of tomorrow, we need to continue to share a story that cannot be forgotten and we must make sure an event like this never happens again.

"Ladies and gentlemen, our lessons today are the hope for tomorrow's world."

NAMES NOT NUMBERS IN NUMBERS

- To date, over 7,000 students in several countries from grade 8 through college have successfully interviewed, filmed, and edited the testimonies of over 4,000 survivors and World War II veterans.

- The more than 550 documentary films produced by the project have been viewed by over 150,000 people and are archived in major museums and academic institutions in the United States and Israel.

DESCRIPTION OF ACHIEVEMENTS AND AWARDS:

Names, Not Numbers was the Premiere film of the Miami Jewish Film Festival in 2020.

One documentary appeared on over 260 ABC affiliates from October-December 2020.

Names, Not Numbers won the 2021 Wilbur Award from the Religion Communicators Council (RCC), recognizing the work of individuals that communicate about values and themes with professionalism, fairness, respect, and honesty. Past winners include Morgan Freeman, Oprah Winfrey, The New York Times, etc.

Tova Rosenberg received the Baumol Award from Yeshiva University for the Names, Not Numbers project in 2006.

For more information, visit www.namesnotnumbers.org.