



## Knowing one big thing: Jewish students, Holocaust testimonies and historical consciousness

Sally Cove

*Sydney Grammar School*

**ABSTRACT:** This article analyses the power or attraction of certain unitary historical meaning(s) that can be generated by Holocaust education. More specifically, it argues that forms of historical consciousness developed by a group of Australian-Jewish teenagers (and accessible herein through a collection of essays written using Holocaust testimony) can be used as evidence of the nature of their engagement with Holocaust history and, as such, revealing examples of the ways in which engagement with Holocaust history has shaped historical consciousness in service to personal and social (communal) needs.

**KEYWORDS:** Holocaust Education; Historical Consciousness; Witness Testimony.

In his *Essay on Tolstoy's View of History*, Isaiah Berlin used a remnant of the work of the Greek poet Archilochus in order to differentiate between the historical-philosophical totalisers and those whose perspective on history is, as Berlin suggests, centrifugal, diverse, multitudinous. "The fox," Berlin reminded us, "knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing" (Berlin, 2014). Holocaust education in the contemporary world appears in multiple forms – classrooms, museums, special programs such as *The March of the Living* – and arguably presents as a struggle between foxes and hedgehogs. On the one hand Holocaust education constructs unitary meanings from the past that claim, amongst other things, to have the power to tackle xenophobia and racism, act as a preventative against future genocide, help to generate ethical character, assert a core Jewish identity. On the other hand, the Holocaust is also, for most teachers, a historical topic amongst many that they cover and their role is that of Berlin's fox: to meet the demands of the history classroom as a site of historical inquiry and analysis that acknowledges the complex, considers the varied, and confronts the horrifying record of this chapter in human history more prepared, perhaps, to accept the lesson that Berlin regarded as Tolstoy's greatest torment – that history comprises the reality of individual human experience, too often a "spectacle of human impotence and irrelevance and blindness" (Berlin, 2014, p. 21) which cannot be ignored in favour of a single, reassuring idea, however great the desire for salvation. The contemporary world thus extends seemingly opposing demands on Holocaust education with regards to student experience and educational outcomes – a demand for many things to be known, but also the demand for one big thing to be known. I would like to argue, however, that there is a form of resolution to be had if one attends to opportunities presented by a philosophy of history that considers text metahistorically; in other words, an

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approach that studies the meanings constructed by students using the historical record and historical testimonies as being themselves indicative of what it is that history can tell us about the formation of historical consciousness. Berlin might have said that this approach is that of the fox who studies the hedgehog, rather than attempts to devour him.

The empirical base for this study is a nine-year record of Holocaust research, testimony use and personal reflection by Australian-Jewish teenagers of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade (aged between fifteen and sixteen years), developed between 2005 and 2014 at Emanuel School in Sydney. This is an ongoing and thus ever-expanding archive of the Holocaust in the contemporary world of young Australian-Jews. It stems from an essay competition funded by a survivor, Paul Drexler, in memory of his father Eugen, who died during the war – killed during a bombing raid, but ultimately a victim of the Nazi forced labour program. Paul Drexler himself, a Slovakian-Jew, survived Theresienstadt as a child along with his mother, emigrated to Australia after the war, and sent his children to Emanuel School – a pluralist, co-educational Jewish day school. The essay contest is mandatory for all students; all essays have to meet set marking criteria and are completed within the same time frame and within the same age cohort. The essays are thus a coherent and defined body of work. They provide a ready source for discussions involving generational change and awareness, issues relating to notions of collective as well as individual identity and memory, and insights into the pedagogical advantages and shortcomings of such an approach to Holocaust education. They also provide a remarkable opportunity for the researcher to access the historical knowledge and understanding, as well as familial, community and personal aspects of students' relationships to the subject of the *Shoah*. Each essay is different – it takes as its starting point a different survivor story, works with the testimony in different ways, and the students perform at varying levels when it comes to historical research, synthesis and exposition. However, what is fascinating about these works is that they almost invariably develop one of a small selection of singular ideas about the Holocaust that they draw from the history that they have constructed. This idea is incorporated either as a form of personal expression that occurs externally to a historical narrative, or is incorporated into the essay either as a device to shape the way in which the narrative proceeds or as a way of bringing an always harrowing story to a conclusion that really does communicate closure and thus, by implication, the understanding of a meaning to this Jewish history. I have loosely categorised these unitary meanings (constructions of discrete forms of historical consciousness) under the headings of agency, *Zakhor*, absence and identity.

Agency is perverse from a historical perspective, but from a philosophical perspective it serves as a poignant reminder of how strongly we resist acknowledging the intense vulnerability of the human body when subjected to historical forces such as war and genocide. It describes the students' determination to see survival as a consequence of human agency – the consequence of acts of self-preservation made possible by strength of character and will. Writing in 2005 about his Hungarian-Jewish grandmother, J.S. notes several times in his opening paragraphs that this was the story of “the determination of one woman to survive,” “a strong-willed woman [...] able to physically and mentally persevere during the *Shoah*” (J.S., 2005). In 2006, student N.G., describing her great-grandmother being brought to a selection with a shoulder infection that would see her selected and gassed, wrote that “[she] had failed to battle the conditions of the camp,” (N.G., 2006) as though it were an absence of will power that wrought the infection and brought her under the scrutiny of Mengele. In 2007, J.K. asserted that “the truth” was that one could survive by “focusing on survival, and by using one’s resources” (J.K., 2007). A 2010 essay by A.K., concluded that her grandmother possessed “raw survival instincts,” (A.K., 2010) useful during a war that saw her make her way alone, on foot, from Poland to the Soviet Union in 1942. These are a small sample, but they serve as exemplars for this particular idea. Its popularity with students is understandable. First, they are often recounting the stories of grandparents that they admire and love generally, and whose survival

they admire and respect specifically. They know the character of their grandparents and that character becomes a part of how they then understand their story of survival. Second, they are dealing with an element of the testimony that they are working with. There is no doubt that survivor testimony offers examples or claims of agency – deliberate acts, expressions of willpower – and there is no need to doubt, for all of Tolstoy’s impotence, irrelevance and blindness, that there were times when it made a difference. The essay’s sponsor, Paul Drexler, tells his story to the students each year, before they commence their research, and part of his narrative is a reflection on his mother’s role in his survival. Her determination for her son to survive the conditions of Theresienstadt was, for the son, evident in her efforts to house him with her and feed him as much as she could lay her hands on – at no doubt great personal risk. Her efforts alone can’t account for his survival, which obviously relied on factors far beyond her control (the failure of the German war effort, the advancing Red Army, and so on); but it no doubt contributed. J.K.’s convictions about the ability to survive being dependent on personal resourcefulness are in part attributable to the testimony that he was using, that of his grandfather. However his grandfather’s testimony does not necessarily lead most obviously to J.K.’s rather empowering assertion. The grandfather’s testimony reads, “We could not think of escaping [...] In those times you are an animal. You are just trying to survive, trying to be” (J.K., 2007). There is something essential and bare about the grandfather’s testimony, the comparison with an animal suggesting an entity stripped of the capacity for decision making and driven only by a primal instinct, that does not make its way into the grandson’s conclusion – that his grandfather had been resourceful and focused; that he had used his “resources” to survive. Even the grandson’s question that gave rise to the response – whether his grandfather had ever considered trying to escape – suggests a desire to believe in a capacity for action unknown and unknowable for most of those who found themselves in a Nazi concentration or death camp.

This leads to a third consideration of student searches for and claims of agency against appalling odds and in impossible situations – what, borrowing from Nietzsche, might be dubbed a will to power. The desire to perceive the human capacity to force action and outcome through strength of will, personal resourcefulness, determination, courage, and so on is frequently a feature of this source material. Of course Nietzsche was a hedgehog, as Berlin himself observed, and an ahistorical one at that, claiming that “Insofar as history stands in the service of life, it stands in the service of an unhistorical power,” and, further, that “with a certain excess of history, living crumbles away and degenerates” (Nietzsche, 1957). Regarding the fox-like historian as incapable of living dynamically – being too burdened by the knowledge of human history – Nietzsche leads us to the paradox observed herein: that, discursively, the will to power exists (in the examples used by these students) as an act of resistance against, and thus absolutely as a product of, detailed, complex, relentless history. What leads these students to their claims of agency is not an ignorance of history, although in some cases their knowledge is certainly sketchy, but an act of resistance to the inexorable lesson it seems to be communicating – that in this time individuals, whole families, entire communities were destroyed because they lacked the power to counter or overcome the actions of a state that had committed itself first to war and then to genocide; *ergo*, that a modern state has the power to subject people to physically intolerable conditions, to collect them, organise them, transport them and murder them. It is thus, of itself, a historical phenomenon (although no doubt it is also claimed by sociology and psychology); an observable reaction amongst these young Jews to their engagement with the historical record and testimonies of the Holocaust.

This phenomenon is also, of course, connected to the second category – *Zakhor*. To remember, *Zakhor*, is not a historical act. Indeed, in the biblical tradition it is obligation more than it is chronicle, a keeping of faith more than a preservation of records: “[...] the Hebrew Bible seems to have no hesitations in commanding memory. Its injunctions to remember are

unconditional, and even when not commanded, remembrance is always pivotal” (Yerushalmi, 1996). Moreover, Yerushalmi (1996) goes on to note, “Only in the modern era do we really find, for the first time, a Jewish historiography divorced from Jewish collective memory and, in crucial respects, thoroughly at odds with it” (p. 93). Once again we discover tension as Jewish historiography is positioned in contrast to the act of sustaining – and indeed selecting - memory. This tension has only increased as the profession of the historian has become less inclined towards the search for a total history that could suggest laws of development, or overarching, spiritually and culturally gratifying principles, and more inclined to embrace not only the necessarily fragmented and imperfect explanatory role, but also the critical role, deconstructing the edifices of collective memory along with everything else. However, in the writing of these teenagers there exists the un- or anti-cynical conviction that history remains a task filled with the obligation to remember, an obligation made acute by the subject material with which they deal.

In 2009, L.B. began her essay with a quote from Douglas Adams: “Human beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so.” However, half a paragraph later L.B. remarks about the quote only that it demonstrates “the value of sharing experiences,” (2009) Adams’ cynical caveat is ignored or lost to the writer’s desire to see in her work a commitment to the collective enterprise of remembrance. J.S. is perhaps the most moving and adamant example of a sense of obligation, writing that “Whilst my grandmother never spoke to me of the details involving the death of my great grandmother, and my great-great grandmother, it is my responsibility to convey the inhumanity of the Nazi gassing chambers, to ensure the world learns the lessons from history and never repeats them” (J.S., 2005). J.S.’s sense of his own role leads to an exhortation that is historical in context, moral in conviction, and deeply personal in tone. In the text it does not sit as a piece of reflective writing at the beginning or end of the essay, but rather erupts out of a passage describing the process of selection at Auschwitz. It reads like a moment of irrepressible anger; a sudden tirade against the events he is forced to recount. It also communicates a sense of taking up the task that his grandmother refused – bearing witness to atrocities that she chose not to discuss. Perhaps this is the extension into a new generation of what Marianne Hirsch dubbed ‘post memory’ when describing the experience of the children of survivors who lived the Holocaust as a pervasive narrative in their lives, but one the trauma of which – because it predated their own birth – they had no immediate claim to, in spite of its very real and ongoing effects. However there is little sense in any of the texts examined to suggest that this new generation feels itself enmeshed in the trauma. Rather they configure their role as one of recording and remembering. As J.S. demonstrates, this is not a dispassionate act, and it is not without a sense of personal responsibility, but it occurs observationally - from outside the narrative, rather than from within.

E.M., writing in 2012, recognises the ongoing impact of trauma in the lives of her grandmother and great-grandmother, stating that “Long after the war had ended, Eva feared another confrontation and the threat of persecution hung over both her and her daughter. They always felt a sense of unease around government officials and found it difficult to trust authority. Holocaust survivors are burdened by the memories of their experiences...” (E.M., 2012). However, at no point does E.M. imply that she has been personally affected in the same way by her family’s experience. Her essay is a comprehensive record constructed without a clear articulation of its part in ‘remembering.’ It stands in contrast to the work of J.S., in which his grandmother’s traumatic experience is clearly linked to his own imperative to write as he claims, “I have written my grandma’s story as a historical text that ensures the atrocities of the *Shoah* will never be forgotten” (J.S., 2005). J.S.’s invocation to remember, his sense of responsibility to convey events, the insistence or fear that forgetting will lead to repetition, all suggest somewhat irresistibly the reading of this text as seeking empowerment in the same way

as the idea of agency seeks empowerment. In this case it is gained by positioning history as a bulwark against further inhumanity - by accepting the responsibility to remember because remembrance is a weapon against forgetting, and forgetting, as J.S. sees it, is what allows for "Holocaust deniers" – which his own work is "a piece of evidence against." And, finally, he concludes that "Those who do not learn lessons from history will be forced to relive them" (J.S., 2005).

Students such as J.S. or L.B. do not stop to reflect on whether there is any evidence to suggest that human history demonstrates the capacity of history itself (as a knowledge system) to divert societies away from catastrophe, anymore than they consider the contradiction between their own conclusions about agency and their subjects' conclusions about luck, chance, accident or, in the case of N.G.'s subject, a belief that a mother, killed by the Nazis, acted as spiritual protection for her daughter. Agency and the demands of memory and the memorial role of history – shorthanded here as *Zakhor* - are ideas that the essays have in common, and they are defensive ideas, ideas suggestive of the students' need to assert a sense of their own power; a sign of their conviction that they can act with consequence, including the act of writing history with the consequence of ensuring memory and thus establishing protection against history repeating itself. As such, they are hedgehog ideas, not only unitary (condensed into a single idea they communicate faith in the power of the individual to control and even thwart historical development) but also acting as a perfect, spiny, singular defence system against the cynical fox.

However, if agency and recall can help students repel the possibility of powerlessness, they seem to do little to offset conclusions regarding the absence generated by the events of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, absence, I would argue, is an idea that extends from *Zakhor*, just as *Zakhor* would appear to extend from agency. Absence is at the core of the obligation to remember. N.G. writes that "Listed in the Torah it states to kill someone is to kill their whole line [the] long linking thread they may have had" (N.G., 2006). The thread metaphor is used throughout her essay, drawn from a poem by her grandmother. N.G.'s preoccupation is with the absence of "Six million threads cut off forever," the promise that they "will forever be remembered," and the recognition that lives that should have been never were because whole lines were ended. Absence, therefore, is not only the absence of the victims, but also the absence of generations unborn. A.O-V, writing in 2008, concluded his essay with a reflective passage drawn from the testimony of his grandfather that presents essentially the same idea: "One of the things I get from being immersed in the study of all this is a sense [of] being constantly reminded of the absence of many millions of people – and now, 60 years later, many more millions of people would have been. And among them my relatives, all of them" (A.O-V., 2008). The creation of a void (an unbearable paradox) is of course an idea evident in a number of forms in Holocaust remembrance and commemoration. In physical form it is perhaps best represented by Daniel Libeskind's Holocaust tower of the Axis of the Holocaust in the Berlin Jewish Museum. What the architect describes as a "voided void" is redolent with the sense of absence that students try so hard to communicate, tripping a little over their metaphors as they attempt to come to terms with what, somewhat abstractly, they name "the six million," or as they seek to define legacies never established by lives never lived in an effort to effectively communicate nothingness.

In order to counter absence with something tangible and positive, the students seem to rely on two connected ideas: the presence of the survivor and the survivor's family and the strengthening of Jewish identity. N.G. concludes of her grandmother's survival that it meant that she could "begin a new life and connect her threads of a warm woollen jumper, a family, a continuation of the six million who could not continue" (2006). Absence, for N.G. is negated by presence. Survivors continue, they are present, and they can fill the void with new generations. Family, continuation, often serves an ameliorative function in the students'

understanding of how their family stories should conclude; in other words, how the Holocaust recedes as family is restored. J.K. concludes his work with the remark that “Jeno [his grandfather] is very lucky to have such a big and close family that has regular Shabbat dinners” (2007). The importance of survivors’ families, indeed the importance of family Shabbat dinners specifically, is a regular feature of the essays, acting as a counterbalance to absence and frequently linked directly to the strength of the Jewish identity. After his remark about family, J.K. concludes with a line from his grandfather’s testimony: “I was born a Jew and I will die a Jew” (2007). A.K. similarly asserts in her conclusion that family and a strengthened Jewish identity are two key aspects of her grandmother’s survival story: “Today, Lena is the centre of a loving family,” and “Lena does not feel [a] stronger [connection] to Judaism, as a result of the War, [one assumes here that A.K. is referring to religious conviction] however she does feel a stronger connection to her Jewish identity, and what it means to be Jewish” (2010). In his essay “Who is a Jew?” Isaac Deutscher worried over this kind of Jewish identity. For Deutscher, unlike the students studied herein, the strengthening of the Jewish identity appears, initially, the very opposite of an affirmation that can be used to counter or at least balance absence. He asks, “When one raises the question of the Jewish identity, one starts from the assumption of the existence of a positive identity. But are we entitled to make such an assumption?” (Deutscher, 1968) For Deutscher, the assertion of a Jewish identity strengthened by calamity is reactive rather than positive; with his usual frankness Deutscher claims, “I would have preferred the six million men, women, and children, to survive and Jewry to perish” (1968). Nevertheless he offers a declaration of his Jewish identity, in spite of his regarding it as reactive, that is not at all dissimilar to the conclusion A.K. reaches about her grandmother, exclaiming that he is “a Jew by force of my unconditional solidarity with the persecuted and exterminated. I am a Jew because I feel the Jewish tragedy as my own tragedy; because I feel the pulse of Jewish history...” (Deutscher, 1968).

In the end, therefore, history, it seems, is the tie that binds; it is history that frightens us into making unrealistic claims about human agency, it is the pulse of Jewish history that commands remembrance and compels the belief that remembrance will be enough to offset further history, it is history that becomes the keeper and the redeemer of the “voided void,” and it is history that consolidates identity. Students’ conclusions about the meanings sustained by the Holocaust are, from a philosophical standpoint, entirely understandable historical artefacts – they are made by humans in a particular context for a particular purpose and they turn to the one big thing for the same essentially historical reason that Tolstoy, according to Berlin, tried to be a hedgehog all his life – because to be a fox is much harder; there is less consolation in being a fox, there is less capacity for defence against the excruciating past. But even if, as educators, we can resolve the opposing demands of Holocaust education by regarding all outcomes as possessing historicity of a sort and certainly produced through historical engagement, I would like to make, as a concluding thought, a kind of plea for the fox. A.K., writing in 2014, is not a hedgehog. He is one of the few students whose work I have read who does not describe an obligation to remember, see himself as stationed against cyclical historical development, comment on absence or legacies, consider human agency to have amounted to much during the years of the Holocaust, or made the suggestion that it has given rise to a firmer Jewish identity. Rather, he delivers a historical narrative stripped of all unitary ideas as he offers one appalling development after another in the story of Lilly Wolf.

When recalling Lilly’s final conversation with her father A.K. writes, “He asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up. Lilly responded that she wanted to be a ballerina and her father immediately called the local ballet school and organized lessons for her. That was the last time Lilly saw her father” (A.K., 2014). A.K. then traces the fate of Lilly’s father as he leaves for Belgium, becomes trapped there by the start of the war, and dies after being deported to Auschwitz. For A.K., the poignancy of the last encounter – the doting father doing something

caring yet prosaic, never to be seen again – speaks for itself and what it says is entirely singular: a specific girl, Lilly, who possessed an individual, very human goal, to be a ballerina, lost her specific father, Otto, to a sequence of historical events and developments that neither could predict nor have the power to prevent. The whole essay is written in this way. A.K. intersperses the governing (and changing) historical context with the impact that it has on Lilly; he follows her story through the German occupation of Hungary, the turning of the tide with Operation Bagration, an encounter with Raul Wallenberg, the Russian arrival in Hungary. A.K. draws no redeeming meaning from the way in which Lilly's story develops or the fact of her survival. He writes of the Russian arrival in one sentence, in the next he writes of the phenomenon of mass rape ("While the Soviet Army liberated Hungary, Russian soldiers raped an estimated fifty thousand women"), in the next sentence he describes Lilly being cornered by three Russian men before concluding "Lilly was one of those women" (2014). He recounts a sexual relationship with a Hungarian detective who promised protection in exchange for sex. It is a demonstration of the harsh reality of Lilly's experience made without reference to fortitude or resilience of spirit. (2014) He speaks of her bribery of officials and farmers as necessary devices to deal with the immediate situation in which she found herself, rather than a consequence of her will to survive. Without a shred of rhetorical flinching he writes about soldiers laying scrap paper over those who died by the wayside during the forced march from Budapest and Lilly ripping the paper from the bodies in order to roll it around tea as a makeshift cigarette. Such telling moments offer the horror and complexity of both Lilly's experience and her character, a view that is compounded by A.K.'s admission that "Lilly remembers being very bored while in the ghetto," (2014) an admission that is entirely unusual in this collection. Students routinely focus on the ghetto as a place of deprivation and victimisation, rarely stopping to consider something as ordinary as the tedium of forced inactivity. A.K.'s ability to resist the temptation to skip over aspects of Lilly's story that are deeply human, rather than transcendent, or find hope or offer redemption in the face of appalling history is touching in its willingness to brave the crumbling of life that Nietzsche predicted.

The essay concludes, "She [Lilly] searched the entire ghetto [Budapest] except for one area. Many bodies had been moved into the old *Mikveh* that had no more water in it. The entire *Mikveh* was full with bodies. Lilly could not bear to look for her brother in there and this is where she suspects her brother was. This was in early 1945. Hungary had been liberated. [...] Lilly had survived" (2014). Brutal in its frankness, it leaves the reader almost longing for some of that fifteen-year-old brash sense of agency and empowerment, stretched metaphors and unifying principles. But it is also, perhaps, a necessary lesson that should be delivered to all students; a lesson about the power of these stories to generate meaning without requiring the offering of a unitary or unifying idea. By resisting the additional temptation to draw from Lilly's own account (or his treatment of it) a connotation clearly contingent on his own sense of what her story means (or what he needs it to mean) A.K. is confirming the autonomy, the individuality of Lilly and her experience. In doing so he is developing a form of historical consciousness that arguably defines the invaluable contribution of the fox. Viktor Frankl, neurologist, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, concludes his thoughts on *Man's Search For Meaning* with the words,

In view of the possibility of finding meaning in suffering, life's meaning is an unconditional one, at least potentially. That unconditional meaning, however, is paralleled by the unconditional value of each and every person. It is that which warrants the indelible quality of the dignity of man. Just as life remains potentially meaningful under any conditions, even those which are most miserable, so too does the value of each and every person stay with him or her (2008).

A.K., by allowing Lilly to be the centre of her own story, without adding the exigencies of his own need for a sense of empowerment, or his own role in fostering awareness, or the demands of Jewish identity, has allowed focus to remain squarely on the individual historical experience

and, importantly, Lilly's dignity remains simply a consequence of her own personhood – her value as a single person – not a consequence of her capacity to act in a certain way, or offer lessons or meanings that we can benefit from, or add to the sum total of Jewish collective identity or memory. What the fox offers is thus the inverse sensibility of Nazism: the recognition of individuality; of the value and the dignity of every human life.

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