The majority of Holocaust survivors never speak publicly about their experiences, but those who do tend to find themselves at the centre of commemorative work in their communities. As Holocaust scholars, Holocaust education institutions, and members of the general public become increasingly interested in how to ethically universalize the lessons of the Holocaust, the public Holocaust survivor’s role has broadened. It is no longer enough to recount one’s own experience; survivors are expected to speak to current human rights abuses and genocides. In Montreal, Canada, a city which once claimed the third largest survivor population in the world, public survivors do a great deal of work. They give testimony in schools and at commemorative events, organize book clubs, write plays, direct films, teach, act as museum docents, and assume roles as community spokespeople. Given their dedication to this work, and a push to get them to speak beyond their personal experiences, we argue that there is a major shift taking place: the act of giving public Holocaust testimony is being professionalized. This professionalization raises unique questions about how people who lived through the Holocaust conceptualize themselves and their identities as survivors. By treating testimony as professional work, survivors contemplate, on a daily basis and in an applied manner, their stances on big questions regarding hierarchies of suffering, comparability, the connection between the personal and the political, blame and forgiveness, as well as many other relevant themes that are central to Holocaust and memory scholarship. All of this plays out in their testimonies.

I ask myself, what is left, from these talks that we do … What is left, one month, I am not talking one day, but one month afterwards, when we consider, as Yves Michaud … said,¹ that he thinks that Jews have the monopoly on human suffering … What is left with these young people who have other priorities, who hear about massacres every day in the four corners of the world, why us … Once we’ve finished, keeping in mind that advertizing takes more than once, twice, because this is advertizing we’re doing, we’re trying to leave a message, something, what is left … My main point is that when I give a talk, I give a talk in which I believe that at least, if they remember only one thing of everything I said, they know at least that if tomorrow, there were no more Jews and there was no more Israel, the world would be as cruel as it is today. If they leave with that understanding, I’ve done my job. (Michel Siritsky)²
In trying to explain some of his frustrations and objectives when giving testimony, French-born Holocaust survivor Michel Siritsky touched on a host of complex issues: how testimony is related to contemporary anti-Semitism; why some young people remain indifferent when listening to stories of violence; and how the Holocaust is related to the past, present, and future of Jews, Israel, and the world at large. What Siritsky’s statement makes most clear, however, is the reflection and decision-making that goes into bearing witness. Survivors know that transforming a horrifying and complex lived experience into an understandable and accessible narrative is a difficult task.

Survivors consciously shape the stories they tell and yet few Holocaust scholars view them as little more than conduits of their wartime experiences. Although some literary survivors, such as Primo Levi and Jean Améry, are exceptions to this rule—studied for their bleak accounts of suffering, their reflections on what it means to have survived, and their thoughts on life in a post-Auschwitz world—scholars generally maintain interpretive authority over the Holocaust. These “experts” are tasked with thinking critically about the Holocaust and its legacy, while “witnesses” are regarded as sources for scholarly research and symbols of the varying meanings of the Holocaust. The important negotiations described above thus remain largely unexplored.

When scholars conduct research with survivors, they also rarely acknowledge that their writing tends to draw on the experiences of a small group of them, namely those who will speak publicly, in depth, and to their interests. Hundreds of thousands of hours of testimony have been recorded by various projects, but the practical limitations of accessing these collections, as well as preferences for narratives that speak to scholarly interests, reduce the pool considerably. Due to their willingness to speak, scholars often “use” survivors who also give public testimony. These people form a sub-community of what we term “professional” survivors. Since these individuals live out their survival in public spaces, they cannot be seen as “typical” survivors. There are different degrees of professionalism within this sub-community. For some, being a survivor is, quite literally, a job; Elie Wiesel, for example, has made a career out of his survival. Our focus, however, is on the sub-community of survivors who frequently bear witness on a voluntary basis as representatives of their local Holocaust centres. This is usually a post-retirement project for them and an unpaid labour of love. Professionalism in this context therefore does not refer to paid compensation, but rather to the commitment and dedication of these survivors to doing the hard work of sharing their narratives publicly. It is also useful way to understand how they handle some of the challenges of this work, such as the institutionalization of their narratives. This article examines how professionalization influences survivors’ narratives, memories, and identities.

In defining the idea of a “professional” survivor, we must note that we were introduced to this term by one of the survivors with whom we work, Ted Bolgar, whom you will meet later in this article. He jokingly called himself a “professional” in many of our exchanges. We initially chalked it up to his incredible sense of humour, but we eventually realized that this term touched on the themes we were exploring with him and others. We use it, as did Ted, in the most positive sense possible, as a way of recognizing all of the thought and work that goes into giving public testimony. Ted, along with our other interviewees, has spent years thinking about, constructing, and perfecting the narratives he shares with diverse audiences. These survivors are constantly learning, through the telling and retelling of their stories, what does and does not work. Most explicitly admit
that they know there are parts of their stories that stay with people and others that are easily forgotten. Some alter their public narratives in response to feedback more than others. This negotiation is an inherent part of their work. In invoking professionalism as a framework we are also referring to the physical and emotional effort that survivors put into the telling of their stories. For some, reliving their experiences becomes easier with time, and for others it is always difficult but, as they often tell us, important and necessary work. Survivors spend much of their spare time sharing their experiences in different settings and at a variety of events, and even more time preparing for, and making sense of, these encounters. Survivors who do professional work acknowledge the public nature of their remembering and are aware of the contexts in which they are speaking; they make strategic choices about what to say, and how, depending on the contexts in which they find themselves. This public and carefully constructed way of remembering creates, as this article demonstrates, a very particular kind of narrative that necessitates its own kind of inquiry.

Examining survivors’ professionalism reminds us that the dichotomy between the “expert” and the “witness” does not do justice to survivors’ engagement and educational activism over the past five decades. Well aware of the politics of recounting and remembering the Holocaust, they do far more than stand in front of audiences and emote.\(^\text{10}\) Issues that are hotly contested within the literature—hierarchies of suffering, communicability, comparability or uniqueness of the Holocaust, blame and forgiveness, the relationship of the Holocaust to larger human rights discourses and genocide prevention—arise constantly among professional survivors.\(^\text{11}\) However, they often navigate these issues more easily than scholars do, as their work is premised upon using their stories to build meaningful connections with their communities.\(^\text{12}\) Moreover, survivors, like scholars, are also broadening the study of the Holocaust and universalizing their stories so that they speak to contemporary atrocities and politics.\(^\text{13}\) Montreal, where our research is based, is an international city that is home to a large population of people who have been displaced by mass violence. In that context, it is no longer enough for survivors to narrate their own experiences; they must connect them. This has also influenced the professionalization of their role. Holocaust testimony has always been political, as it has been utilized and mobilized for its moral lessons—about the dangers of anti-Semitism, racism, unquestioning obedience to authority, among others—since its inception,\(^\text{14}\) but now it is inescapably so.

Working with Montreal Holocaust survivors

Our research, which has involved life history interviews, ethnography, and collaborative, community workshops, is based on five years of work with Holocaust survivors who volunteer at the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre (MHMC).\(^\text{15}\) A part of the Montreal Life Stories project\(^\text{16}\) at Concordia University, our objective has been to better understand survivor-educators’ role in Holocaust education. Why do survivors speak publicly? How do they communicate their complex experiences to diverse audiences? And, in what ways does this telling affect their memories of the Holocaust and their identities as survivors?

We began our research by conducting interviews with survivors who responded to a press release that Stacey circulated within the MHMC. We estimate that there are
approximately 40 Holocaust survivors who give testimony in Montreal, and our team of trained interviewers worked with 19 of them. This group is composed of Ashkenazi child and adult survivors, from a range of European countries (Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Romania, the Netherlands, Belgium, France), with diverse Holocaust experiences. Some were imprisoned in death camps, labour camps, and concentration camps, while others were hidden during the Holocaust with or without their families. What unites these survivors is that they feel able and are willing to speak as often as they do. Most acknowledge that this ability is rare, and thus they see it as an important responsibility—they bear witness for those who perished and for those who cannot speak. Several of our interviewees believe that the fact that they were able to successfully rebuild their lives in Canada (measured by happy marriages, healthy children and grandchildren, and good jobs) is part of what enabled them to speak about their experiences.

Adhering to the humanistic ethos of the Montreal Life Stories project, we, as co-interviewers, used a multiple, life story interview approach that privileged spending time with interviewees, building relationships with them, and sharing authority both within the interview space and throughout the research process. Our interviews have been interviewee-led conversations that spanned all periods of survivors’ lives and the themes that emerge from them. Recounting and reflection have gone hand in hand. Since 2008, we have returned often to our interviewees’ homes to build upon our previous encounters. This has been an invaluable way to get to know survivors as people with profound and complex stories that go far beyond their wartime experiences.

Much of our research has also involved integrating ourselves into the MHMC’s culture and its sub-community of Holocaust survivors, as ethnographers. We regularly attend MHMC speakers meetings, during which survivors and employees discuss the practical and policy issues related to their work; community events, such as the MHMC’s annual Holocaust Education Week; and the public testimonies given by our interviewees. Additionally, Stacey was a survivor chaperone on the 2010 March of the Living trip, an international Holocaust education programme that sends Jewish teenagers, accompanied by community leaders and survivors, to Poland and Israel. This experience allowed Stacey to get to know two survivors who we interviewed on numerous occasions better and in a different context. The small group of people who regularly bear witness in classrooms, the museum, or other settings form a tight-knit community that resembles a boisterous extended family. Most of these people have known each other for decades, and for better or for worse they are bound together by their common passion for Holocaust education. We have therefore tried to access survivors’ many identities: as individuals who are parents, grandparents, sisters, brothers, aunts, and uncles; as members of this extended survivor family; and as respected figures in the Jewish community.

Finally, we partnered with Brunhilde Khandanpour, the MHMC’s survivor liaison at the time, and two survivors, Batia Bettman and Olga Sher, to co-organize a series of three workshops. A type of “professional development,” this idea originated in a conversation we had with Batia, wherein she articulated a long-held desire to create spaces where survivors could discuss their educational experiences and improve their practice. This was an early hint at the gravity with which survivors approach their work. In these encounters, we encouraged survivors to think deeply and collectively about the practical considerations of speaking (what they tell; what they withhold; what tools/cues they
use; and how much time they need) as well as their educational motives (their message; how they deal with difficult questions; and whether they are comfortable speaking about other genocides and controversial political situations). These have been productive and challenging spaces, enabling us to gain a sense of this community’s dynamics and how they affect survivors’ outreach.

“…[I] am a professional survivor”

Holocaust survivors have been a driving force behind the MHMC since its inception in 1979. They have always played an integral role in its management and evolution, though there is a noticeable, recent, and at times, controversial shift in power underway, a point to which we will return below. Survivors largely created the MHMC’s first exhibits, The Jewish Child Before the War and Spirited Resistance, and effectively broke a 35-year silence around the Holocaust in Montreal. Few survivors began to give testimony until the surge in Holocaust denial in the late 1980s, as well as anti-Semitism and advancing age, convinced them of the urgency to do so; retirement also freed up the time required to volunteer. Speaking out, however, was not easy. “[I]t was very difficult to start out,” Sidney Zoltak recalled, “but once you [did], it [became] easier.” Still, bearing witness continues to be challenging for many. Sleepless nights, hours of preparation, heightened emotions, and general uneasiness are all part of the process.

Despite these difficulties, this work has become a full-time voluntary job for some survivors at the MHMC. These people often spend a couple of days a week speaking to groups within the museum or travelling to classrooms throughout Montreal and the surrounding region, and occasionally granting interviews to the press. Many say that a sense of obligation drives their work; every time we interviewed Mayer Schondorf, before he passed away in December 2009, he stressed that as the only surviving Slovakian Jew from his class of 60 students, he felt compelled to give testimony:

If I can tell their stories, they are alive and I feel this is my duty. I mean it’s not I’m trying to make a, not a hero of myself, or a saint out of myself, no, I feel genuinely that it’s my responsibility as long as I’m able and capable of doing it and know there’s no line-up of people that want to do it, or are able to do it, I must do it. And it gives me a satisfaction to be able to do it … I found a niche [within my community] and I am good at [it] and so I give of myself.

Mayer often problematized how the Jewish and larger Canadian community made heroes out of survivors, due to survivors’ difficult first years in Canada, and because he did not “like to be [regarded as] an exhibit.” However, speaking about the Holocaust is something that Mayer proudly and willingly did due to this sense of obligation.

Ted Bolgar, a survivor we first met in January 2009, shares many of the same motivations as Mayer. During this initial encounter, and in those we have had since, Ted spoke at length about the Holocaust and his commitment to bearing witness: “I try to make you believe the unbelievable and by now I am a professional survivor.” To communicate the “unbelievable,” Ted showed us the PowerPoint presentation he created for his listeners. Framing his story around its images, the slides alternate between personal and generic
photographs of the Holocaust. After telling his listeners about his life prior to the war, he explains Hungary’s political context and the events that led to his family’s deportation to Birkenau. His presentation shifts from a family photograph to one that depicts a Hungarian transport arriving at Birkenau. This allows him to speak about the division of his family and the few memories he has of this place. He then switches to a photograph of the Warsaw ghetto in ruins, leading him to recall his work collecting bricks there. Next, he shows a series of photographs of Mühldorf, a camp where he worked as a labourer until his liberation. Ted’s memories of this place are clear and detailed. He lingers here, speaking about the daily conditions of the camp as he shows an image of a bowl, much like the one he attached to his uniform, and three slides that illustrate survivors’ emaciated bodies. “I looked a lot like them,” he declares. Finally Ted’s presentation returns to the personal, with a photograph that was taken in the Displaced Persons (DP) camp of Feldafing, where Ted spent four months: “[My] main occupation was eating. I gained 40 pounds!” One cannot help but be drawn to his full face and the seriousness in his eyes (see figure 1).

Ted’s rendering of his story is well-rehearsed. It can easily be told, and students’ questions addressed within a typical teaching block of time. A sweet and easy-going man, he is popular among teachers and students alike. He revisits the same classrooms every year and at the time of writing this article, he had gone on the March of the Living eight times. He has a way with children, especially teenagers. He is approachable and quick to offer a hug or a joke when they are needed. Although Ted has always been forthcoming in our exchanges, both inside and outside the interview space, he has shrugged off most of our attempts to engage in reflection, choosing instead to tell his story “like it was,” in a straightforward manner. When he shares his story, he does not become perceptibly emotional. Even when Ted and Stacey strolled arm in arm through Birkenau,

**FIGURE 1** A screenshot of Ted Bolgar’s PowerPoint presentation. Courtesy of Ted Bolgar.
the last place he saw his mother and sister, he told jokes to lighten the sombre mood. Yet the moment a student tapped him on the shoulder and asked him about his experiences he methodically relayed his story with utter seriousness. He is always ready to recount, but he almost always does so by repeating the very same version of the story he tells with his PowerPoint presentation; he is clearly conscious of his boundaries in speaking publicly. Understanding this process of enforcing his boundaries is key to unravelling the threads of his story.\textsuperscript{33} Ted’s public persona, and the professionalism with which he constructs it, are choices that enable him to live out his identity as a public Holocaust survivor.\textsuperscript{34} Furthermore, examining Ted’s choices requires some introspection on the part of Holocaust scholars: what expectations do we impose on survivors, and can we justify them? Is a professional survivor allowed to crack a joke, keep a tale to themselves, or choose to focus on the facts, rather than the emotional texture, of their story?\textsuperscript{35} If we have feel uncomfortable about Ted’s professional demeanour, does that say more about us than it does about him?

While no two survivors view their roles in the same way, those within our group do share certain characteristics. They have taken a series of difficult, non-linear, and even incommunicable experiences and “made them a story,”\textsuperscript{36} repeatedly and voluntarily telling and retelling them to those who will listen.\textsuperscript{37} They know what they want to say and what they will never say and often these limits cannot be traversed. Their stories may be deep and reflective or chronological and methodical, but either way, these layers or lack thereof are significant in themselves. Professionalism, in its many guises, is a helpful framework because it views survivors’ narratives, like Ted’s, as considered and intentional. Understanding Ted’s narrative choices as professional ones allows us to focus on survivors’ agency when doing this work—they determine its terms. When Ted chooses to either tell a joke or turn to the narrative he has carefully crafted, we argue that it is just that: a choice, which considers his audience, his hopes, his personal well-being, and the goals he seeks to accomplish as a professional survivor. We will explore this question, of how goals and motives shape these survivors’ public narratives, below.

**Testimony as a means of connection**

We met Leslie Vertes at the MHMC during our inaugural survivor workshop. We began the session with a round table, encouraging everyone to introduce themselves. When it came to his turn, Leslie stood up and declared: “I am the youngest, and the newest, speaker … Since 2004 I have only 24 engagements, 4000 students, my name is Leslie Vertes, unfortunately I came from Hungary.”\textsuperscript{38} The rest of the group chuckled at this tongue-in-cheek introduction. Later, in a discussion about how people structure their testimonies, Leslie showed us a hand-drawn pie chart, which demonstrated what he thought an ideal testimony ought to look like. Each piece of the pie represented a different topic: personal background; historical background; life before the war; life during the Holocaust; life after the war; and coming to Canada, and they were all assigned percentages. Leslie clearly understood his role as a survivor-educator to be both rigorous and precise, and as we have argued above, professional. Upon leaving, Leslie handed us a copy of his speaking resume, an up-to-date listing of every testimony he had ever given, and his business card, stating that he wanted to be interviewed if we deemed him
qualified for our project. Later that day, he emailed us a link to his blog\textsuperscript{39} and a copy of his written testimony, which has been published online.\textsuperscript{40}

Leslie is passionate about giving testimony in inter-cultural and human rights-oriented settings. Six months after our initial meeting, Anna sat around a table in a ballroom at the Gelber Centre, next door to the MHMC, and listened to Leslie tell his story to a small group of human rights educators. Every year, Equitas, an NGO dedicated to human rights education, facilitates a programme that trains and passes on knowledge to human rights educators from around the world.\textsuperscript{41} There is always time set aside in the program for participants to spend an afternoon, over lunch, with a Holocaust survivor; this particular event is co-organized with the MHMC. That day, the ballroom was full of tables, each seating 10 participants and one survivor, and while Holocaust survivors dominated the space, there were also survivors of the Rwandan and Cambodian genocides in attendance.\textsuperscript{42} After Anna took her place, Leslie showed her the materials he had brought for participants. This was his second time speaking at the event and he arrived well prepared, with copies of his testimony, which he had bound himself, and a number of other Holocaust memoirs, which he had acquired from the Azrieli Foundation.\textsuperscript{43} In addition to these materials, he had papers relating to his talk the year before. Of particular interest was a cue card, upon which he had recorded the names and nationalities of the previous year’s participants. Leslie went on to repeat this exercise on a new cue card, noting his listeners’ diverse backgrounds.

\begin{figure}[ht]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{equitas_table.png}
\caption{Leslie’s rendering of the Equitas Table. Leslie posted this image on his blog: http://itismeleslie.blogspot.com/ (accessed 27 September 2012).}
\end{figure}
When it came time to speak about his experiences, Leslie declared that he would not give a lecture because “this is not a story; this is my life.” Then, accommodating breaks while listeners ate lunch and interrupted him with questions (as he encouraged them to do), he guided the table through his narrative. Beginning with the statement “I was born four times,” he spoke about his birth in Budapest and then described the fear, hiding, false identities, and close calls that characterized his wartime experiences. At liberation, he was one of the few Jews to be rounded up with SS officers and other military prisoners by the Red Army and sent to work in a labour camp in Southern Ukraine. While there, he fell gravely ill and credits his recovery to a young Russian doctor who took exceptional care of him. As he explains in the written copy of his testimony: “The War was over for me only in June 13, 1947, when the Russians transported me back to Budapest.” Throughout his narrative, whenever Leslie spoke about an instance when he escaped death, he paused, explaining that these were examples of when he was born for the second, third, and finally fourth, time. In an interview with him a few weeks later, after having recited his Holocaust experience to us in almost the exact same way first, he described why he uses this narrative device:

And I say a short story of my life, not the whole … Just what I gave you, the little booklet, a short introduction of Hungary, and a short introduction of anti-Semitism all around. And then my … how did I survive? And how I was born four times. Because this way they can relate … I survived. Many speakers, they say dates and places and so on, long stories. “No,” I say, “I was born four times.” And then everybody says, “What do you mean, four times?” … Then I say, “Look, Jim, wait and I will tell you how.”

When Stacey asked him to explain how he decided to tell his story that way, through this metaphor of rebirth, he responded:

I don’t know, I don’t know. Because … I felt like I did. Because, that was the end of my line, when they shot … that was … finished. When they wanted to take me to Gestapo, I knew it was finished. I knew people, they went in, were tortured, and … bingo. Out. And when I was sick … So they are the young people, they’re interested to know a little bit, but they’re not interested to know the killing … They are interested in some kind of adventure, in some kind of movement. So when I say, “I was born four times,” they say: “It’s impossible.” I had a student, he stood up, he said, “Leslie,” because my name is always Leslie, “that’s impossible!” I said, “You just sit down, and I will tell you, in my case, it was.”

This metaphor of being born four times served dual purposes for Leslie. It was a useful way for him to express how he understood his Holocaust experience and it was also a “hook” that captured and held the attention of his audience. Just as he stated this was not a story, but his life, these two purposes were not at odds with each other, and the latter did not in any way threaten his narrative’s authenticity. Rather, by thinking through how to best express his story to audiences, he came upon a metaphor that spoke to his experiences. He was parsing his own memories through the framework of trying to communicate them. While Leslie was particularly self-reflective in discussing this and could articulate the process clearly, it is a general theme that came up in our interviews:
survivors did not see any conflict between their memories and the stories they constructed for public audiences. While the public stories may leave out details, may contain narrative arcs, and may be tailored for particular groups of people, most survivors who do this work nevertheless view them as “true” and as coming from the same process as remembering itself. While Holocaust scholars worry about authentic memory and memory that is clouded by other elements, Leslie did not worry about such a dichotomy. This narrative was true and a good story.

Most of the survivors at the MHMC recount their experiences to young people and therefore they tend to focus on the most effective ways to communicate the Holocaust to audiences for whom such atrocities are a world away. The Equitas event was different in that survivors were addressing adults engaged in human rights work. While Leslie spoke, Anna wondered what these people, many of whom hail from countries that are currently embroiled in their own urgent conflicts, were thinking about as they listened to his 70-year-old tale. Was it relevant to their work? Were they comfortable with the event’s framing as an intergenerational dialogue that positioned survivors of a past atrocity as wise elders, there to teach them about the significance of their own work? Did this sort of structure play into uncomfortable issues pertaining to the comparability of the Holocaust and hierarchies of suffering?

Participants, whether or not they had their own narratives of suffering, responded to Leslie’s testimony with great respect and humility. A young man from Afghanistan related Leslie’s experiences to the Afghani history of Soviet occupation, while others returned to Leslie’s narrative and asked him thoughtful questions: Why did you remain silent about your experiences for 35 years? What led you to speak? What was it like to tell your story for the first time? Leslie explained that his motivations for speaking stemmed from his desire to make something productive out of his story. For him, the Equitas event was an ideal venue in which to achieve this end. Speaking publicly greatly affected him as a person: it “changed the way I see other people … I approach people differently … I approach people more as a friend first.” As he urged participants to continue their important work, they exchanged email addresses, took photographs of each other, and asked him to sign their new books. The event ended emotionally; Leslie had had a profound impact on his listeners. Like Ted, he had crafted a particular narrative that aimed to communicate his past in a way that connected with his audience.

The politics of broadening Holocaust education

What does it mean to be a professional survivor in a globalized world in which people absorb stories about atrocities from 24-hour news channels? As genocide scholars debate the merits of comparative genocide, Holocaust scholars discuss questions pertaining to uniqueness, and Holocaust museums struggle to maintain their relevance, especially in light of increasing public interest in more recent atrocities, survivors are discovering meaningful ways to maintain the integrity of their memories while also connecting with new audiences. This balance manages to transcend many of these issues. All our interviewees believe that the Holocaust is a unique event in world history that represents a particular and extreme manifestation of ethnic hatred. In one of our workshops, for instance, survivors stressed its enormity and
the cruelty and indifference that led to it, and passionately argued that this must be emphasized.\textsuperscript{52} Nevertheless, they also saw their mission as educating the public about the ways that such horrors occur, pointing out how little the world has changed since the Holocaust and advocating for a human rights agenda. While scholars argue about specificity and universalization, professional survivors are doing both in the same breath.\textsuperscript{53} As Sidney Zoltak told us:

Yeah, I’ll talk about other genocides, why not? … A genocide’s a genocide. The genocides, or … the continuity of the repetition of genocides for the last 70 years is because of indifference … the same indifference as it was then. If there is any similarity, if there is any similarity, between the genocide in Rwanda and the genocide of the Shoah, of the Holocaust, it’s the indifference. Outside of that there is no similarity.\textsuperscript{54}

Sid easily makes connections with other human rights violations when he thinks that they are relevant and important, all the while maintaining that the Holocaust is unique. The issue is not about whether survivors are uncomfortable comparing the Holocaust to other atrocities. Rather, it is about being allowed to do so on their own terms. Many survivors universalize their experiences with little pathos. For people like Leslie, this is part of what drives them.

Events, like the co-sponsored Equitas luncheon, demonstrate how the MHMC is responding to the public’s interest in contemporary atrocities. Popular representations of the Rwandan genocide and Canadian grassroots attempts to effect change in places like Darfur have led the museum to broaden its mission statement and create programming that speaks to these issues.\textsuperscript{55} Such a move is not without controversy. Some of our interviewees often feel like their voices are not being heard when the MHMC tries to universalize their narratives; their relationship with this institution can be tenuous. This is because such moves are associated with the centre’s attempt to plan how it will function when its last survivors have died,\textsuperscript{56} as well as disagreements over MHMC policy changes that survivors perceive as ignoring their opinions. Despite such sentiments, most continue to maintain contact with the MHMC because this is the primary place through which they can share their experiences with younger generations and effect change.\textsuperscript{57}

Usually, when Holocaust survivors are invited into inter-cultural spaces, it is because they are the most visible and experienced group to have spoken about and commemorated genocide in Montreal. As a part of the MHMC’s 2009 Holocaust Education Week, organizers partnered with Concordia University’s Institute for Community Development and co-sponsored an event entitled “Remembering the Holocaust: Why Do I Still Testify?”\textsuperscript{58} We attended it to hear Sidney Zoltak speak to the mixed crowd that assembled in a bustling Montreal café. Sid began by telling the audience of approximately 15 people an abridged version of his story: he was born in a village in Eastern Poland, and after the war started, he and his family were interned in a ghetto. They eventually escaped a ghetto round-up and sought refuge in nearby forests and with anyone who was willing to accommodate them until they were taken into hiding by a young Polish shepherd and his family. They waited out the rest of the war on their farm and after it ended they travelled through Europe and settled in Italy, where Sid first lived with his parents in a DP camp and then in the Selvino School, a children’s home that was run by a Zionist organization.
Sid does not tell his story often. Even on this evening, when he spoke for about half an hour, his demeanour was emotional, referring to what he had lost, the kindness of the Polish family that saved him, and the educators at the children’s home who helped him get back on his feet. After Sid had finished speaking, the conversation immediately turned to the larger meanings of his testimony, such as the moral imperatives of listening to a survivor and how the lessons of the Holocaust can be universalized to propel us into action today. While we felt somewhat uncomfortable with this shift toward universalizing, so much as to render Sid peripheral to the conversation, we nevertheless witnessed an intense exchange between generations, as both young and old contemplated how best to connect the past with the present. Sid himself professed to have been inspired by the dialogue.

During our interviews with Sid, he often spoke about the stock he puts in younger generations to correct the mistakes made by his generation:

Maybe young people are going to pick it up, and find it important ... to spread that message, that it’s important to make this world a better place to live in ... I mean take a newspaper and you’ll find out ... everybody’s against everybody. It’s a mess.69

He also told us about the solidarity he feels with other survivor communities, emphasizing the importance of being engaged at a larger level. A few years ago, for instance, the Rwandan community invited Sid to bear witness at one of their events. While there, Rwandans discussed the prevalence of suicide among their friends and family members. Sid responded by telling stories about suicide in the post-war Holocaust survivor community, relating intimate details of how his family came together to support a distressed and suicidal survivor relative. Suicide is a taboo topic in discussions of the Holocaust, but Sid saw this as a unique opportunity to share what he had learned, transforming painful experiences into productive exchanges.60 He has often stressed to us how meaningful this experience was to him.

Sid also works as a spokesperson for the survivor community, as the co-president of the Canadian Jewish Holocaust Survivors (CJHS) organization. Many of our interviewees have noted an increasing tendency to use survivors as convenient illustrations for discussions on the Holocaust, while otherwise ignoring their opinions and giving them smaller and smaller roles within commemorative organizations. Sid believes that this is happening at the MHMC, as its focus shifts elsewhere, so his CJHS affiliation gives him an important voice.61 On a number of occasions, he spoke about the institutionalization of Holocaust survivors within the larger community and how this has forced them to operate within a fairly narrow paradigm:

Our strength is gone, it’s not there. And the same thing applies to Holocaust survivors that were activists ... they’re gone. They’re no more. The ones that have remained, are trying to work and accommodate the philosophy of communities. They’re not going out ... and certain things I do not agree with certain directions. My community ... there are other communities where people are not in agreement with them either.62

This is the tenuous context that characterizes survivors’ shifting roles. As a spokesperson, Sid has the ability to speak publicly without being mediated by other institutional concerns. For example, in November 2009, the international Jewish organization B’nai B’rith published a full-page advertisement, entitled “The Unholy Alliance,” in the National Post
newspaper. It argued that there were “common objectives of Nazism and radical Islam: Killing Canadian men and women on the battlefield, incitement of children through schools and media, annihilation of world Jewry, and subjugation of every one else, [and] world domination.” Sid was quoted as saying: “We survivors have fought everybody that tries to trivialize the Shoah. We get very, very angry when it is done by Jewish leaders. I think that they should know better.” Sid certainly sees the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a relevant subject for Holocaust survivors, but he objected to the way in which the community was discussing it, using his role as a spokesperson to take a stand.

In June 2010, we attended a speakers’ meeting at the MHMC that discussed the B’nai B’rith scandal, and the related question of whether survivors ought to discuss their views on Israel when speaking publically. Although the MHMC quietly objected to the advertisement, its director, Alice Herscovitch, explained that discussions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict were outside of the centre’s mandate and were thus forbidden when conducting MHMC business. Two survivors then brought up the speakers’ guidelines—a document dating to 2004 that lays out the parameters for how survivors should behave when representing the organization—emphasizing that it includes a ban on discussing politics. Few survivors, it must be noted, knew of this document’s existence, a clear indication of its relevance to their roles as both docents and speakers. Some demanded that these guidelines be changed to allow speakers to answer political questions. In doing so, they also requested that training sessions be organized to better prepare them for these types of questions, a call we heard many times in our interviews. What followed was a spirited debate on the appropriateness of discussing politics during and after survivor testimony. The issue was never resolved. Comments ranged from, “it’s everyone’s responsibility to talk about Israel,” to “in my opinion, not everyone is qualified to answer political questions.”

One survivor pointed out that since the MHMC was, at that very moment, displaying a temporary exhibit about the Armenian genocide, it had already moved beyond its exclusive mission of educating the public about the Holocaust. This observation seemed to go to the heart of the conflict. Although survivors and Holocaust organizations are broadening their practice to speak to transnational and international issues, certain topics are safer territory to tread than others. Therefore, despite a similar trajectory, they are sometimes working at odds with each other. The MHMC’s interest in larger human rights issues must be balanced with the demands of board members, questions of funding, and community accountability. Survivors, on the other hand, are trying to situate their own experiences within these global issues, whether or not they are politically popular.

As Leslie and Sid make clear, survivors universalize their experiences when they feel it is appropriate to do so, drawing on their own lives and convictions, and how their survival has taught them to understand the world around them. Since their engagement with a variety of topics, ranging from other genocides to Israel, is practical and personal, they navigate discussions of them with more subtlety and less pathos than is perhaps possible in the abstract. They are focused on connecting with other people, whether they are students in a classroom, human rights workers in a training session, or members of other cultural communities with their own histories of violence. This drive to connect, and the tailoring of stories to circumstance and audience, is what makes these controversies and seeming contradictions less difficult to reconcile. No two survivors do this the same way, but they all do it.
Conclusion

Survivors who regularly bear witness are increasingly professionalizing their practice, especially as the act of giving testimony becomes more intertwined with discussions on human rights and genocide. Their work is important and engaged. It is a form of educational activism. It is also a full-time job, though their efforts are voluntary. Survivors have carefully crafted narratives that speak both to, and beyond, their Holocaust experiences. They address the mess in which we find ourselves in the twenty-first century, offering up their own difficult experiences as lessons for the future. These are complex people who do complex work. They interpret their own lives, and the human rights context in which they are increasingly speaking, through a prism that tries to connect them with their varied audiences. We stand to learn a lot from their practise.

To begin to understand survivors, and their identities, narratives, and work, we need to examine the professional context in which they labour. It is not enough to focus on one chapter of their lives, such as the war, the post-war period, or their retirement. Each is connected to the other. It is also not enough to solely forge relationships with them in artificial interview spaces. We must get to know them personally, as people with families who belong to various communities—survivor, Jewish, Canadian—and hold particular political and world views. This takes time, patience, and effort, and requires fearlessness in the face of contentious community politics and the dangerous conversations that they tend to spark. It happens over dinner, in telephone conversations, over the course of a survivor workshop, and on long bus rides through Poland. Regarding testimonies, Jürgen Matthäus recently wrote:

[the] issue of how much and what we can learn from survivors is further complicated by their personal or political interests, changes in their memory, the incorporation of acquired knowledge into one’s personal story, and our preferences and interests as users and recipients.66

We could not agree more, and indeed, we would like to take this point further, by calling for Holocaust scholars to examine their own expectations and how these influence our interactions with, and understandings of, survivors. Even when survivors speak to us in more intimate spaces, such as interviews, they are still recounting publicly and thus they are still being thoughtful and particular in what they retell. We must be honest about this. When survivors speak publically, deviate from the accepted archival account, leave gaping holes in their narratives, and make connections with politicized events or contemporary atrocities, we need to ask ourselves why and how. There is a story there that speaks to deeper meanings.67 The context in which these narratives are developed, shared, and perpetuated is crucial to understanding how they came to be.

Acknowledgements

This article originated in the authors’ postdoctoral research at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada; Sheftel was funded by the Fonds québécois de recherche sur la
société et la culture (FQRSC) and Zembrzycki was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The authors also wish to thank the Montreal Life Stories project (www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca) for its generous support. In addition, we are grateful to Henry Greenspan and the two anonymous peer reviewers for their constructive and helpful comments as well as those made by members of the Centre for Ethnographic Research and Exhibition in the Aftermath of Violence (CEREV) reading group.

Notes


2. Michel Siritsky, third Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre (MHMC) Survivor Workshop, Montreal, Quebec, November 18, 2010; Sheftel translated this quote from French. Recordings of the workshops and interviews cited in this article are housed at Concordia University’s Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (http://storytelling.concordia.ca/).

3. Some scholars, including Greenspan, On Listening to Holocaust Survivors, have challenged this narrow understanding of the roles of Holocaust survivors. On the communicability of Holocaust memory see, for instance, Langer, Holocaust Testimonies; Caruth, Unclaimed Experience; and La Capra, Writing History.

4. Other exceptions to this generalization are, of course, the many survivors who are also scholars, including, but not limited to, Saul Friedlander, Ruth Kluger, and Geoffrey Hartman. Lawrence Langer and Geoffrey Hartman have, in their own ways, critiqued the cultural discourse around Holocaust survivors, the moral lessons we attempt to extract from them, and the roles we impose upon them. See Langer, Holocaust Testimonies; and Hartman, Scars of the Spirit. Greenspan also problematizes reductive approaches to survivor narratives.

5. A recent collection is dedicated to exploring the dynamics of interviewing one such survivor: Matthäus, Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor.


7. In On Listening to Holocaust Survivors, Greenspan discusses one such survivor whose account, because of its poignancy and usefulness in illustrating moral guilt (popular fodder for discussion among Holocaust scholars), has been “used” by multiple scholars, as well as public institutions, to vastly different ends.

8. This point is related to a larger body of literature that seeks to problematize the idea of a “typical” survivor. See, for example, Langer, Holocaust Testimonies, for a discussion on the homogenization of Holocaust narratives.

9. Although the issue of audience is not a major focus in this article, it is important to note that our survivors speak to a range of groups throughout the Montreal region. Their listeners vary in age, they frequent Jewish and non-Jewish schools, and they speak to ethnically diverse audiences. The Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre (MHMC) often acts as a conduit between survivors and their audiences. If a
teacher or an event organizer wishes to book a survivor, they contact the MHMC, which then puts them in touch with a survivor. That said, survivors bear witness in a variety of spaces, including classrooms; at conferences; in various churches; at local festivals; at the MHMC; and on the annual March of the Living. Most ensure that their narratives respond to the specificities of a given audience. For example, they are careful about not sharing overly graphic details to younger listeners, or about giving more context on Judaism to non-Jewish listeners. This aspect, regarding audience and the places where stories are told, is further developed in Zembrzycki and High, “When I was your age.”

10. When listening to testimony, both in academic and non-academic settings, we have often felt that audience members regard survivors in this manner.

11. For texts that engage with these controversies, see Stone, Constructing the Holocaust; Rothberg, Multidirectional Memory; Langer, “The Alarmed Vision;” Moses, “Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas;” Patterson and Roth, After-Words; Langer, Holocaust Testimonies; Caruth, Unclaimed Experience; and La Capra, Writing History.

12. There is a growing literature that addresses how survivors engage with the issues raised by scholars. See, for instance, Garbarini, Numbered Days.


14. Some recent work by Holocaust scholars has noted that universalization and comparative use of testimony began in the immediate postwar period. See, for example: Gilbert, “Jews and the Racial State.”

15. For more information about the MHMC, go to: http://www.mhmc.ca/.

16. Undertaken with Montreal’s Rwandan, Cambodian, Haitian, Jewish, and other Diaspora communities, Montreal Life Stories (http://www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca/) was a five-year project that was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) grant; the project ended in July 2012. Rooted in a collaborative, humanistic interviewing methodology, it conducted close to 500 interviews with people who came to Montreal from situations of large-scale violence and then disseminated these stories through academic, new media, and artistic channels.

17. In this article, all our case studies are drawn from the experiences of male interviewees. This was not a deliberate gendered choice. Our interviewees are men and women and they all engage in this kind of work with similar levels of commitment. Rather, those discussed speak to the particular points we make here. Our expanded study on this topic will be based upon a more balanced discussion.

18. For an examination of how Montreal Holocaust survivors rebuilt their lives in the postwar period, see Sheftel and Zembrzycki, “We started over again.”

19. Sharing authority refers to re-conceptualizing the power dynamics inherent in human-centred research. In an oral history interview, interviewers bring their scholarly authority to the space while interviewees share their experiences. Ideally, this creates an egalitarian setting where there is respect for both authorities and fruitful collaboration can occur. See Frisch, A Shared Authority; “Shared Authority,” Special Feature in the Oral History Review; Corbett and Miller, “A Shared Inquiry into Shared Inquiry;” and High, Ndejuru, and O’Hare, “Special Issue of Sharing Authority.”
20. For a reflection on our interview experiences, see Sheftel and Zembrzycki, “Only Human.”

21. Much of the inspiration for our approach can be found in Greenspan’s *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors*; and Greenspan and Bolkosky, “When is an Interview an Interview?”

22. In terms of approach, we have also been drawn to these insightful and sensitive ethnographies: Lehrer, *Jewish Poland Revisited*; Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*; and Greenspan and Bolkosky, *When is an Interview?*

23. For a related discussion, see Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*.

24. Regarding this history, see Bialystok, *Delayed Impact*, 190–94.

25. There is a large debate about postwar silence, but we do not have the space to address it here. See, for instance, Greenspan, *The Awakening of Memory*; Bialystok, *Delayed Impact*; Sheftel and Zembrzycki, “We started over again.”

26. Sidney Zoltak, interview by Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, Montreal, Quebec, 11 March 2009. Unless otherwise indicated, the authors conducted all of the interviews that are cited in this piece.

27. Mayer and Rena Schondorf, interview by Steven High and Stacey Zembrzycki, Montreal, Quebec, 28 January 2009.

28. See Bialystock, *Delayed Impact*; and Sheftel and Zembrzycki, “We started over again.”

29. Mayer and Rena Schondorf, interview, Montreal, Quebec, 11 June 2009.


31. Ibid.


34. Hartman stresses that testimony has both private and public dimensions: it is “confessional” and “spiritual” and “political” and “judicial.” See Hartman, “Learning from Survivors,” 195.

35. Wendy Lower recently recalled a related experience she had in her classroom with Helen “Zippi” Tichauer, a survivor with whom she has developed a close relationship. When a student asked Tichauer about survivor guilt she shut down, thus rupturing the connections that had been made in the classroom. Lower chalked this episode up to trauma and the limits that survivors impose on themselves when they bear witness, noting that Tichauer “is not a professional speaker who has honed a performance;” this latter point referenced an earlier remark she made about Elie Wiesel and his popularity and moral authority, as well as a noticeable lack of intimacy when he speaks to large groups. Tichauer is, however, quite similar to our interviewees, in that she has honed her story and is used to telling it publicly. Such incidents require scholars to consider their own expectations and impositions. There is meaning in Tichauer’s refusal to deeply reflect upon her Holocaust experiences. See Lower, “Distant Encounter,” 114–15.
36. Here we are referencing remarks that Leon, a survivor with whom Greenspan has worked extensively, made during one of their interviews, as he discussed the process of recounting and its difficulties: “It is not a story. It has to be made a story in order to convey it. And with all the frustration that implies. Because, at best, you compromise. You compromise.” Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors*, xvi.

37. All survivors grapple with these issues but those to whom we refer do so more often. See Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors*; Greenspan and Bolkosky, “When Is an Interview an Interview?”

38. First MHMC Survivor Workshop, Montreal, Quebec, 30 November 2009.

39. “It is me Leslie,” Leslie Vertes’ blog (http://itismeleslie.blogspot.com/).

40. Vertes, *Can You Stop The Wind?* This publication may also be accessed at: http://migs.concordia.ca/memoirs/Vertes/leslie_vertes_intro.htm.

41. For more information about Equitas, go to: http://equitas.org/en/.

42. Inviting other survivors to the lunch is partly a pragmatic way to deal with the bilingual nature of the program. While most of the Holocaust survivors are Anglophones, many Cambodian and Rwandan survivors are Francophones, thus enabling them to host tables composed of French participants. This aspect of the event is, however, also indicative of the shift outlined in this article: of widening Holocaust discussions so as to address human rights more generally. What was interesting on this occasion was that some participants were also survivors of the Rwandan and Cambodian genocides, thereby narrowing the gap between speakers and their audiences. This provided a good basis for making strong connections, but it also affected the intergenerational ethos of the event.

43. The Azrieli Foundation (http://www.azrielifoundation.org/memoirs/) is a Canadian NGO that publishes its own series of Holocaust memoirs and distributes them free of charge.

44. Equitas Human Rights Educators’ Workshop, Montreal, Quebec, 15 June 2010. This quote is taken from Sheftel’s field notes.


46. Leslie Vertes, interview, Montreal, Quebec, 17 June 2010.

47. *Ibid*.

48. See Langer on “deep” versus “common” memory in *Holocaust Testimonies*.

49. Levy and Sznaider, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*; and Moses, “Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas.”

50. Equitas Human Rights Educators’ Workshop. This quote is taken from Sheftel’s field notes.

51. For an overview of this debate, see Rosenbaum, *Is the Holocaust Unique?*. 

52. Second Survivor Workshop, MHMC, Montreal, Quebec, 21 June 2010.

53. Yehuda Bauer, in *A History of the Holocaust*, argues that the Holocaust can be compared to other atrocities but that it must also be understood as unique, in its own right.

54. Sidney Zoltak, interview, Montreal, Quebec, 19 March 2010.

55. According to the MHMC’s website, which was re-launched in 2010, the centres’ objectives are: “To sensitize people of all ages and backgrounds on the Holocaust through commemorative events, survivor testimonies, educational programs and a museum; to provide the tools to fight racism and promote respect and human dignity; to present opportunities for intercultural understanding; to promote


57. This reason for speaking was cited widely at the second MHMC survivor workshop that we organized on 21 June 2010. It was also a major theme in an interview that Sheftel and Jessica Silva conducted with Belgian survivor Davy Trop. In particular, he was sceptical of the usefulness of personal Holocaust narratives but viewed his role of teaching about prejudice as absolutely essential. See Davy Trop, interview by Anna Sheftel and Jessica Silva, Montreal, Quebec, 16 March 2009.

58. For more information about Concordia University’s Institute for Community Development and particularly its University of the Streets program, go to: http://instdev.concordia.ca.

59. Sidney Zoltak, interview, Montreal, Quebec, 18 March 2009.

60. Sidney Zoltak, interview, Montreal, Quebec, 16 June 2010.

61. Ibid.


64. Ibid.

65. MHMC Speakers’ Meeting, Montreal, Quebec, 2 June 2010. These comments were taken from the authors’ field notes.

66. Matthäus, “Conclusion: What Have We Learned?” 121.


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