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# Writing Project 3: Testimony vs. Literature

[Aaron B. Holocaust Testimony](https://fortunoff-aviaryplatform-com.ezproxy.mtsu.edu/collections/5/collection_resources/1075)

I am writing about the testimony of Aaron B., born in Warsaw, Poland on June 8, 1925. Aaron describes himself as having an excellent childhood until the German invasion of Warsaw. He recalls his father being arrested and taken by the Germans to dig ditches along the Russian border, but heroically he volunteered in place of his father. He describes the appalling conditions of the labor camp while digging endless ditches: “It was the beginning of November when we were digging, and it was very cold already. We were up to our knees in water and the leeches were sucking our blood. It was very bad and it was very cold.” He and a friend knew there was no way they could survive much longer and managed to escape back to Warsaw. It took the two 11 days to run back to Warsaw, convincing those they met along the way for food and directions. The following February, he was sent back to work for the Germans again in the place of his father. He was specially recruited as a shoe shiner for the German officers and pilots—a job which came with many privileges. He describes his skills at speaking with guards and officials and explains how on multiple occasions he was able to talk his way into better positions. He had a German officer aid in the escape of him and his loved ones from a ghetto and shares how he later escaped his own execution with the help of a Ukrainian guard. After the war he and his remaining loved ones reunited, he served in the Israeli Army, and then he emigrated to the United States.

Time and time again Aaron B. exhibits incredible bravery, wit, and perseverance, qualities that have been prevalent in all of the literature assigned for the course. In particular, Aaron B. reminded me of Vladek Spiegelman from *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale*,written by Art Spiegelman. Aaron and Vladek’s stories have many commonalities. First was their similar demographic. Both lived in Poland at the time of the German invasion and were young white Jewish men who had seemingly good lives before the horrors of the Holocaust began. A major shared theme I noticed was their perseverance and skill in making the best of awful situations, along with their ability to convince those in power to do things in their favor. Each was able to use their skills and cunning to put themselves into less vulnerable positions. In order to be closer to his wife Anja in the concentration camp, for example, Vladek demonstrated that he was a skilled laborer and was worth more to the Germans alive than dead. He also successfully bribed Nazi guards to have Anja relocated to his camp, working in a munitions shop. Similarly, Aaron possessed many of these same skills and used his resourcefulness to negotiate with guards and officers for a better job that came with privileges that were of great benefit to him and his loved ones. Even more specifically, both of these men coincidently worked with shoes: Aaron was a shoe shiner for German pilots and officers and Vladek was a skilled shoemaker in the camp.

Extreme bravery was another similarity. I am confident that most whose lives were impacted by the Holocaust demonstrated bravery, but the courageous actions that these two men took to fight for their survival were incredible. Multiple times Aaron’s father was threatened by German officers to be taken to labor camps. As an older man, the chances of his father making it back alive were slim, so Aaron showed extreme nobility by stepping up to protect his father—a choice that must have been frightening for a boy to make. Yet Aaron showed no signs of weakness. Aaron then made the decision with a fellow prisoner to make the dangerous escape from the Russian border to Warsaw to get back to their families. Aaron wanted nothing more than to be at home to protect his sister and parents, so he ran across the country for 11 days to make it back. Just as Aaron showed unconditional love for his family, Vladek served as the rock of his family. He displayed bravery and courage in the darkest times when those around him had no more energy to give towards survival. He emotionally carried his wife Anja through the traumatic experiences in the concentration camp which included hearing about the death of their son Richieu. Vladek’s wife Anja took the extremely hard, as any loving mother would, and had no more desire to live. Vladek told her, "No darling! To die, it's easy...but you have to *s*truggle for life! Until the last moment, we must struggle together! I need you! And you'll see that together we'll survive” (Spiegelman 122). Bravery, resilience, heroism, courage, wit, and love for their families were major reasons both Aaron and Vladek survived the Holocaust and lived to tell their stories.

Testimony and literature have both been fascinating and effective educational tools throughout this course. I enjoyed different aspects of each form as a way to expand my knowledge about the Holocaust from incredible survivors. I have read more literature regarding the Holocaust than I have heard testimony, so I was more accustomed to the memoirs we read this semester. Reading literature allowed me to use my imagination to create the scenes described, which I enjoy when reading any form of writing. That being said, it is very easy to make assumptions when reading a book, as you have to visualize based on the limited information you are given. Each person's imagination will be different when reading a memoir, which might not be helpful when learning about something so rooted in fact like the Holocaust. I really enjoyed the video testimony from Aaron. It was enlightening to actually see what the person looked like telling their story rather than trying to piece together an individual. Hearing Aaron’s accent in the interview was something I really enjoyed, as well as seeing his facial expressions and emotional mannerisms. I also value the fact that these interviews are unscripted, and the survivors aren't given much guidance. They are able to tell their story in a raw manner, whereas in a book the editorial process can be lengthy and go through multiple hands. While there are beneficial aspects to both forms of personal stories, I find a visual testimony to be more effective educationally, as it makes the experiences they describe feel more “real.”

I think this final project served as a successful way to conclude all that we have learned this semester. Watching video testimony was really valuable to me, as I was able to put a face to each survivor telling their story. My grandmother was a Holocaust survivor and has been interviewed about her own experiences, so seeing a database with so many other survivors with similar stories was very emotional for me. The number of people affected by the Holocaust is so large that sometimes I find it hard to comprehend that each individual person has their own heartbreaking story. Having the opportunity to explore such a protected database with thousands of these personal accounts is so important, and I am incredibly grateful platforms like these are available to the public. While I had felt educated about the Holocaust prior to this class, I have learned so much more. I had never been exposed to stories of non-Jewish survivors; reading about the experiences of homosexuals and Romani (formerly called Gypsies) was very educational. This course has impacted me in numerous ways. I have been exposed to ideas and stories that I never would have been if not for Dr. Helford’s choices. I have become much more appreciative of my life and my circumstances after growing more aware of what some people have had to live through. Most of all, I admire even more how communities can come together in the face of great evil, and how the instinct to protect loved ones can push a person to survive incredible odds.