12-15-2015

Remembering the Holocaust with Rosalie Franks

Jill Rodrigues
Roger Williams University

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.rwu.edu/weekatroger_featured_news

Part of the Higher Education Commons

Recommended Citation
https://docs.rwu.edu/weekatroger_featured_news/546

This News Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Week at Roger at DOCS@RWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Featured News Story by an authorized administrator of DOCS@RWU. For more information, please contact mwu@rwu.edu.
Remembering the Holocaust with Rosalie Franks

From her work on Steven Spielberg’s Holocaust survivors project to her RWU classroom, adjunct professor instills the importance of human rights and social justice

December 15, 2015 | Jill Rodrigues ’05

BRISTOL, R.I. – Seventy years have passed since the Holocaust ended with liberation of the concentration camps, but people like Rosalie Franks work to ensure its legacy is never forgotten.

In the 1990s, she devoted five years to interviewing 92 Holocaust survivors for Steven Spielberg’s Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation (now the USC Shoah Foundation), a web archive of 51,000 video testimonials from survivors around the world. Since that experience, Franks – a longtime adjunct professor of critical writing, literature and philosophy at Roger Williams – has brought back lessons on human rights and social justice to her classroom.

What preparation did the Shoah Foundation give you?

We trained with scholars of Holocaust studies, who provided additional texts to study. They explained the importance of being sensitive to the survivors – that over and above hearing their story, we had to acknowledge the person’s humanity. I would pre-interview each person and then return with all that background information for a second interview, which could last three to seven hours.
How did you remain composed while listening to their stories?

It affected me deeply to hear about the terrible suffering of another human being. Sometimes I would be very sad for days after an interview. But that meant I empathized with the person.

But these weren’t just stories of tragedy?

In many instances, they were stories of resilience, determination and growth. Love for their families kept them going. Their faith kept them going. That was their source of strength.

Tell me the story of the man who escaped a concentration camp.

Kurt Thomas, a young man from Czechoslovakia, was working on a farm in Poland when Germany invaded the country. He was taken to Sobibór, an extermination camp, where a group of prisoners planned a breakout. One man climbed the fence and cut the electrified barbed wire, while others killed the camp leaders. During the turmoil, Kurt escaped and fled for two or three days, not knowing any of his surroundings. Meanwhile, the Germans had rounded up and shot others who had run. By sheer luck, Kurt ended up in the same town where he worked and found the Polish farmer, who hid him in the pigsty until the war ended. The Gestapo came around several times and questioned the farmer, but he never betrayed Kurt. (Watch two of her unabridged interviews with survivors – Kurt Thomas and Joseph Singer of Germany.)

Why choose video as the medium?

Visual histories allow us to witness a person’s emotional response, to see their sadness and perplexity in telling it.

Is there an art to creating visual histories?

You have to be a careful listener who knows when to say nothing but also knows how to shape the interview so it remains coherent and interesting. You search for details and the richness of the meaning of the experience being described.

Where would you conduct the interviews?

I interviewed most survivors in their homes, and occasionally they would be in a location like a university. Many took place throughout New England and in South Florida, two were in Washington, D.C. and some in Europe.

Did you work directly with Steven Spielberg?

I did not work with him, but Steven Spielberg requested to watch the full video of one of my interviews
– a 97-year-old survivor, at the time of the interview, named Erich Leyens. His family had been taken from Germany and separated; after the war, he learned from Anne Frank’s father – who was his friend – that his niece had survived and was living in America.

**What compelled you to be a part of this project?**

Listening to a survivor’s story tells them, ‘You matter. What happened to you will be remembered, and because you had the courage to tell your story, people can learn from your experience.’ I felt I was making a contribution to the survivor and to future students who would learn about this historical event. And in the process, I felt it was providing meaning to my life – that I played a small role in helping all of us remember.

**How should people today honor the lives lost to the Holocaust?**

People need to remember what happened to the Jews and to millions of other people so that it never happens again. We must commit ourselves to ensuring that society – here, now – teaches people of all ages the importance of safeguarding democracy and respect for diversity.

**Is that why you design courses around those themes?**

I want students to develop their own sense of values, and I use readings from Plato, Langston Hughes and Holocaust survivors to introduce them to that process. (For in-depth reading into Holocaust studies, Franks recommends these memoirs and historic accounts). Through literature that examines ethics, human rights and racism, we ask questions like: ‘What are you willing to stand up for?’

**What is your role as liaison between Boston-based Facing History and Ourselves and Palm Beach Fellowship of Christians and Jews, which recently bestowed upon you the 2015 John C. Randolph Award for your dedication to teaching and inspiring respect for diversity to generations of students?**

My responsibility is to designate teachers to be trained in the Holocaust Studies Program at Facing History and Ourselves, which educates teachers about the Holocaust and strategies they can use to motivate and inform students. We reach out to high schools in the entire Palm Beach County area and select teachers in history, social studies and journalism, for example. I also facilitate the annual writing contest for all middle and high school students; they write an essay to answer a question such as, ‘What is the meaning of morality?’

**What is often overlooked about the legacy of the Holocaust?**

The impact on the children and grandchildren of the perpetrators – they feel an overwhelming sense of
shame. They were deeply saddened by the horror of what their families had done. What we do lives on after us. The good that we do lives on. But the evil that we do affects not only the people perpetrated against, but future generations.