Carson Phillips suggests the use of archival documents, memoir, and recorded testimony to engage students in learning. Use the three survivor testimonies below, from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Croatia, in conjunction with those in the Gurewitsch essay (pp. 48–55) for a rich and varied look at the fraught experiences of Jewish families struggling to survive and, ultimately, rebuild their lives.

Carson Phillips

Using Archival Documents, Memoir, and Testimony to Teach About Jewish Families During and After the Holocaust

My darling Verusko, I do not know the outcome of my illness, but in any case, please do remain an honorable, fair, and hardworking girl and the Almighty will bless and protect you. Your beginnings will be hard and tough. … Claim our life insurances. … It will be your dowry; set it aside; no one can foresee the future.
—Letters to Veruska (Schiff, 2008, p. 31)

In the 1930s and 1940s, when National Socialism, deeply rooted in ideological concepts of *Lebensraum* and an *Aryan Herrenvolk,* swept across Europe, it unleashed an unprecedented assault on Jewish communities and families. When Nazi perpetrators humiliated, beat, or otherwise terrorized Jews in the streets, they sent a clear message that traditional norms would no longer prevail. Until this time, Jewish men and women in Western and Central Europe had adapted themselves to the prevailing bourgeois model that conferred responsibility for the physical survival of the family on men but placed its psychological and spiritual well-being in the hands of women (Hyman, 1998, p. 27). Now, Jewish men could not guarantee the security of their families; Jewish children were not safe. National Socialism, then, overturned conventional norms and thrust Jewish families into situations they were seemingly ill prepared to meet.

The end goal of National Socialism was nothing less than the destruction of the Jewish people, religion, and culture. While it is true that all Jews were targeted, the responses of men, women, and children to unprecedented acts of terror differed; understanding the depth and breadth of both gendered and familial responses is a central component of Holocaust education. The following three examples illustrate the paradigm of how Jewish individuals shifted and adapted their familial roles and responsibilities when faced with persecution and devastation.

PRESERVING FAMILY THROUGH A *TZAVA'AH* (ETHICAL WILL)

As autumn 1945 turned to winter, 19-year-old Veruska (Vera) Schiff (née Katz) [Fig. 1] came to the stark realization that

FIG. 1: Vera in Prague circa 1939–1940 (from the collection of Vera Schiff).

none of her relatives would be returning to Prague. Her entire extended family had been murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau and Maly Trostinec, killed in the collective revenge exacted upon the communities of Lidice and Lezaky, or had perished in Theresienstadt. For Schiff, coming to terms with the enormity of loss was one of the first challenges to be confronted after the euphoria that followed liberation waned. Indeed, the only reminders she had of her family and of their previous life in the comfortable Letna district of Prague were a few photographs that had been returned to her by a former domestic who had been in her family's employ. In rebuilding her life after liberation and starting her own family, these photographs would assume an intrinsic significance far outweighing their material worth. In the absence of surviving family members, the pictures proved that a loving family had indeed existed, even while a cemetery plot or tombstone did not.

Building a new life on the ruins of her former existence was daunting, but pivotal to her success was her relationship with Artur Schiff, a man she met in Theresienstadt. Her mother had already succumbed to illness, but 60 days before the liberation of the camp by Soviet troops, she and Artur arranged a traditional Jewish wedding ceremony in Theresienstadt. A *ketubah,* a Jewish marriage contract [Fig. 2], bearing the date the 21st of Adar 5705 (March 6, 1945) attested to the enduring belief in Jewish religious tradition and a commitment to Jewish life and family, even in the darkest of hours of history. Written illegally in the camp, it bears the signature of Dr. Friediger, Chief Rabbi of Denmark and one of the few Danish Jews deported to the camp.

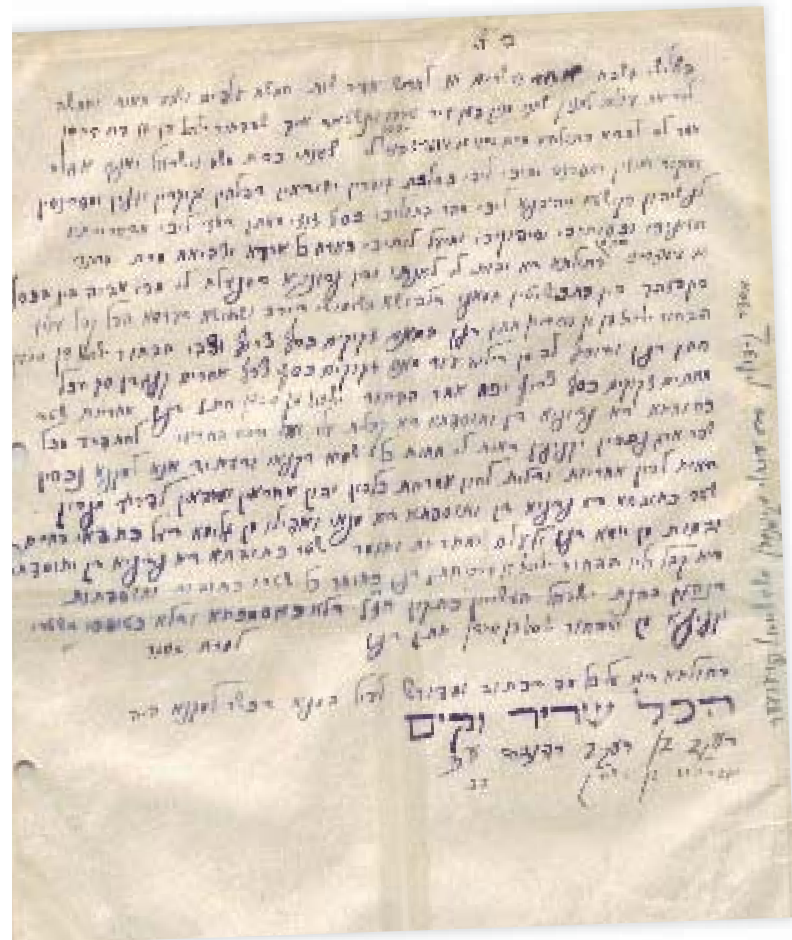

FIG. 2: *Ketubah* (from the collection of Vera Schiff).

After liberation, when Czechoslovakian authorities officially nullified concentration camp weddings, the couple repeated their vows in a civil ceremony in Prague. However, they kept their original *ketubah*. Schiff writes, "The ceremony under the torn *chuppah* [canopy] in Theresienstadt felt more spiritual and reverential, appropriate to celebrate the dignity of the union" (Schiff, 1998, p. 201). The reconfirmation of her wedding was an integral component of integrating the past with the present, enabling her to build a future with her husband.

Another component that assisted Schiff in rebuilding her post-Holocaust life was the tiny secret diary [Fig. 3] that had been kept in Theresienstadt by her dying mother, Else Katz. The repeated loss of family members exacted a heavy emotional toll on the elder Katz, but her diary enabled her to record aspirations for her sole surviving daughter. Perhaps most importantly, it allowed her to leave behind a written life lesson for Vera. The last entry in the diary, a letter addressed to Vera using the dative declination "Verusko," was a *tzava'ah*, an ethical will containing instructions on how to live a good life and how to rebuild when Nazism would finally be defeated. Although soaked in sadness, the text provides hope that the suffering will end and that life will return to normal. At the beginning of the letter, Else Katz writes, "I hope and have faith that your broken heart will not crush you; trust the strength of your will! Do not give in to your sorrow and anguish; you have to look after your health, my child!" We can only imagine that, in the midst of suffering and death, this written expression of such love and hope, the tender words of a dying mother to her only surviving child, must have been offered as a source of inspiration to Vera to carry on after her mother's certain death.

The letter offers a series of instructions on how to begin her new life alone after liberation. Else Katz writes, "At first you will have to entrust our financial affairs to a decent and honest lawyer. You have to claim our life insurances, on the name Zigfried Katz at Viktoria Company." After identifying a long list of belongings that have been stored at various homes of non-Jewish friends in Prague, she concludes, "It will be your dowry; set it aside; no one can foresee the future." Her dying concern is for the well-being of her daughter, that she be equipped to begin a new life, and that justice will ensure that the material goods taken from them during the war years will be returned when the war is over.

The tiny diary of Else Katz, found in her bedding by Vera after her mother's death in August 1944, testifies to her belief that Nazism would be defeated and that the Jewish future and family would be rebuilt. The bonds of family and motherhood triumphing over adversity can be felt in these simple yet eloquent lines, evidence of the caring of a parent for her child and the critical role that familial love plays in solidifying one's future.

These reminders of family would travel with Schiff throughout her life. When she, her husband, and young son made *aliyah* in 1949, the *ketubah*, tiny diary, and family photographs were among the few possessions she was permitted to take from Czechoslovakia. Twelve years later when the family immigrated to Canada, the documents, too, continued their journey, a link between past and present, a symbol of Jewish identity and continuity.

FIG. 3: Else Katz's diary from Theresienstadt (from the collection of Vera Schiff).

PRESERVING FAMILY BY DEVELOPING SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

For Alex (Alexander Sandor) Eisen, a sheltered childhood in Vienna was shattered by the *Anschluss,* the German annexation of Austria in March 1938. The *Anschluss* was accompanied by the persecution and roundup of Jewish men and the introduction of racist laws. These new living conditions brought a harsh reality to the religiously observant Eisen family. Nazi persecution threatened the very nature of their family structure, as well as their lives, challenging them as individuals and as a family to develop survival strategies outside of their normative experiences.

As conditions in Vienna worsened, Eisen's parents, Abraham and Roszi Eisen, decided to take their family to Hungary. Seeking sanctuary in the parental motherland held the promise of safer living conditions away from the overt antisemitism ubiquitous in Austria. Still, 1938 was a perilous time, and at the border crossing, Abraham Eisen was refused entry into Hungary, although he possessed valid papers. The family continued on, while Abraham returned to Vienna to get additional paperwork, including further evidence of his Hungarian origins. In Vienna, he was rounded up by local Nazis and forced to kneel and lick the cobblestones of the street (Eisen, 2010, p. 356). Eventually, he was released, and this time he successfully made his way into Hungary and joined his family in Budapest. One can only imagine the emotional scarring that the acts of Nazi degradation had wreaked upon his confidence as family provider and patriarch. Such humiliations were as much an attack on the Jewish family and Jewish masculinity as they were upon the person.

Abraham Eisen was arrested a second time by Hungarian border police. Sentenced to three months in prison, he feared the ramifications of remaining in Hungary. As Alexander Eisen (2010) recounts in his memoir, "My father was desolate. For a religious Jew to be incarcerated among common criminals, especially antisemitic criminals, was totally unacceptable and very dangerous. He thought, probably very justifiably, that he might not make it out alive" (p. 37). No doubt the fear was compounded by the regular roundups of Jewish men for slave labor and military work, from which many never returned. Abraham Eisen made the precipitous decision to flee to Palestine rather than report to jail. The family, its very nature and structure altered, would not know of each member's well-being until the end of the war.

As Lawrence L. Langer (1982) posits, such "choiceless choices" have an intrinsic irresolvable quality to the decision-making process. As such, they are not even a case of negotiating between a greater or lesser evil; they are "crucial decisions [that] did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of abnormal response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim's own choosing" (p. 72). The moral dilemmas that Jews faced provide valuable teaching moments.

In his memoir, Eisen (2010) is clear that this was not an abandonment of the family but a conscious decision to preserve it. Had the elder Eisen accepted the prison sentence, he would have faced almost certain death. Leaving Hungary increased his chances for survival, but it came with the enormous consequence of leaving his family. His decision to leave his family and flee was made in a time of great peril, and as such, it is not one that can be judged according to societal norms. As educators, we must ensure that students do not view through contemporary perspectives such situations that often arise in memoir and testimony.

With the patriarch gone, the Eisen family relied upon an extended network of relatives, friends, and contacts to assist them. The responsibilities of adulthood were thrust upon youth, often inverting traditional familial roles. In 1943, when Eisen turned 13, he took charge of his bar mitzvah

a Jew and in the modern Jewish State of Israel. He left with his family's blessing, knowing that it would be easier to leave individually rather than as a family group. He writes, "Oddly, my mother and sisters were not sad to see me go. All of us wanted to reach Palestine as quickly as possible" (Eisen, p. 109). Uniting in their determination to reach Palestine provided a support system that made *aliyah* possible as individuals. The devastation and destruction of the Holocaust had erased any interest Eisen might have had in remaining in Europe. Like many survivors, he had a compelling need to start over in a new land, free from the dark memories of the Holocaust. Zionism was the foundation on which his new family and life would be built.

PRESERVING FAMILY THROUGH CHANGING FAMILIAL ROLES

Esther (née Schwabenitz) Bem, the youngest of three daughters, grew up in a traditional Jewish home in Zagreb, Croatia. The difference in the siblings' ages—her sister Jelka was 11 years older and her sister Vera 9 years older—contributed to a nurturing and protected childhood. With the German occupation of Croatia in 1941, the family encountered dramatic new obstacles that challenged their continued existence and forced them to negotiate new familial roles and responsibilities.

As conditions worsened for Zagreb's Jews, the family made a series of decisions in May 1941 that would dramatically alter the nature of their family unit. Jelka, 21, left home to join the partisans. Vera, 19, was sent to Belgrade where haven was arranged with relatives. For Esther and her parents, an extraordinary secretive journey out of German-occupied Zagreb to Italian-controlled Ljubljana was arranged. Her father had discovered that for a large fee they would be escorted out of Zagreb and across the border. In her recorded oral testimony, Bem (1987) says,

> My father came home one day and said, "I found a connection. We are leaving. We are going to Italy. We are going to try and cross the border. I paid the money, I gave all our jewellery. We're leaving in a few days," ... so we left. We boarded a train; a German officer was accompanying us. ... He was like our watchdog. (1987, *Oral Testimony Project,* Holocaust Centre of Toronto, Disk 16, Retrieved March 23, 2010)

Then under Italian jurisdiction, Ljubljana offered hope of sanctuary. The family was classified as "Civil Prisoners of War," which afforded them basic necessities and allowed them to live openly as Jews. After a month, the family was

FIG. 4: Alexander (Sandor) Eisen as a young man in Hungary when he was living under false papers (from the collection of Alexander Eisen).

preparations himself. Eisen describes the toll the Holocaust had exerted upon his extended family. "Most of my uncles, who would have helped me arrange a bar mitzvah, were in labor camps by then" (Eisen, p. 57). In the absence of male family members, Eisen entry's into adulthood was an almost solitary event.

This newfound inner fortitude and independence would serve him well in his struggle for survival. Eisen, like the other members of this family, spent the remaining war years hiding in the open using false identity papers [Fig. 4]. Assuming a false Hungarian identity provided Eisen with protection, albeit limited. A ubiquitous sense of fear permeated daily life, but most members of the family living in Budapest with false papers survived.

Upon liberation, Alex Eisen embraced Zionism. Having survived in a perilous environment that demanded he hide his Jewish identity, Eisen was determined to live openly as

transferred by train with other Jewish refugees to the town of Possagno in the Provincia di Treviso in northern Italy. Even as refugees, the family had a measure of security not possible in German-occupied Croatia.

During this period, from 1941–1943, Esther Bem became fluent in Italian, a skill that would prove paramount to the family's survival. She also learned a pragmatic skill, weaving shopping bags of various sizes from the leaves of young corn plants, providing her with a valued commodity that could be sold or exchanged for foodstuffs. As a result, Bem, at 12, was able to supplement the meager rations her family received and gradually assumed a greater role in the well-being of her parents. She comments,

> I was quite enterprising. My parents were older and I was, in a way, in charge of their lives. They were not as flexible as the others; the others were much younger than them. They just couldn't adapt. It was much harder for them than for the rest to adapt to this new life. … I learned that this [weaving corn leaves] was a skill. I started doing it and selling and exchanging for bread or for butter or for fruit, and I felt very good about it. I felt very secure learning that, and I had more and more orders. (1987, *Oral Testimony Project,* Holocaust Centre of Toronto, Disk 16, Retrieved March 23, 2010)

Familial roles continually shifted and were transformed as each of the family members responded to the demands of their precarious new environment.

The German occupation of Italy in September 1943 necessitated the family's flight from Possagno to the town of San Zenone. They now had to conceal their Jewish identity. Increasingly, Esther became the family's spokesperson. Her fluent Italian offered a measure of protection as the family tried to blend in with the local population. Living under false papers and aided by a sympathetic parish priest, the family posed as an ordinary Italian family who had lost everything in the bombings. To conceal her father's imperfect Italian, the family concocted a story that he suffered a great shock from the bombings and was unable to speak.

This role as spokesperson was put to the ultimate test when Esther appeared before the German officer in charge of the town to request ration cards for her family. Legitimate ration cards would solidify their new identity in the eyes of the townspeople. Esther and her father went to the German headquarters. She describes the episode:

> Beside the German was standing a young Italian … interpreter, and he says, in German, *"Wie heist Sie?"* (What is your name?) I understood every word, but I faked that I didn't. So the Italian … asks me: *"Come si chiama?"* So I answer. I wait for the question in Italian, and I answer. … I told him the whole story, how we lost everything, and our coupons were in the train with our clothing, and we lost all our clothing, all we have on [us] is our identification cards, and we are here, we cannot even buy food, and it is very difficult for us, please, if he could issue us those cards. He looked at us … and then he said … "Do you speak German?" I said no and that was it. He believed us. … and they issued us those cards and we walked out. (1987, *Oral Testimony Project,* Holocaust Centre of Toronto, Disk 16, Retrieved March 23, 2010)

Later, in the same recording, Esther says, "This moment and this time, standing in front of him, made out of me a grown-up. I finished with childhood." Standing before the German officer and successfully acting as the family spokesperson was the culmination of the transitioning role from protected daughter to protector. The family survived the remainder of the war. After liberation, they returned to Zagreb in search of family members and were reunited with their middle daughter, Vera. Later, they discovered that Jelka was killed while on a partisan mission. In 1950, to escape the continued presence of antisemitism in Yugoslavia, the family made *aliyah.*

In each of these three cases, family was an integral component to both survival and the rebuilding of Jewish life; in each case, vulnerable children adapted or assumed new roles and responsibilities equated with maturity and adulthood. Each of these narratives provides powerful teaching examples of individuals and families struggling to respond to the onslaught of Nazism and illustrates the fact that for those who survived, rebuilding was often an arduous journey filled with pain. Yet, these survivors did not seek revenge on Nazi perpetrators and their collaborators; rather, they embarked upon courses of study and careers, formed new relationships, found love, and rebuilt families. Indeed, after an era that sought to annihilate Jewry, life became the best expression of revenge.

CLASSROOM STRATEGIES: PROMOTING CRITICAL-THINKING SKILLS USING ARCHIVAL DOCUMENTS, MEMOIRS, AND RECORDED TESTIMONIES

The survivors presented here have written memoirs or recorded their experiences digitally. Using selected passages from the memoirs or testimonies allows students to engage directly with the human experience during and in the immediate post-Holocaust periods; the individual becomes vivid when we are able to see the person and hear her voice. Recorded testimonies, such as those available through the Shoah Foundation (www.college.usc.edu/vhi/) or the 1939 Club (www.1939club.com/VideoTestimonyList.htm) will often include segments on family life, identity, and rebuild-

ing. One compelling segment that often resonates with students from diverse backgrounds is Esther Bem's testimony; it can be accessed at http://college.usc.edu/vhi/otv/otv.php. In this section, Bem discusses the challenges that accompanied her liberation. Having been hiding in the open in an Italian village under the false identity of Else Tamino, she struggled to resume her own individuality and Jewish identity.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

Questions for students to consider include:

- What are some reasons that survivors chose to write memoirs or record their testimony?
- Some survivors did manage to keep or retrieve photographs of their pre-Holocaust lives. What is the significance of such photographs for survivors? For us? What do they represent to the survivor? To you?
- What are some ways in which the value of photographs and documents exceeds their material worth?
- When Czech authorities cancelled the legitimacy of their Theresienstadt wedding, why do you think Vera and Artur Schiff had a civil ceremony but not a second Jewish ceremony?
- Why do you think survivors focused on acquiring an education and rebuilding family life rather than on revenge or retribution?
- Vera Schiff, like many survivors, was never able to reclaim the personal property or assets her family possessed before the Holocaust. Research the restitution programs in Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Croatia. What is the symbolism of restitution or, alternatively, of failing to provide restitution? Visit the Web sites of the Conference on Jewish Material Clams Against Germany (www.claimscon.org) and the National Fund of the Republic of Austria (www.en.nationalfonds.org) to learn how some countries grappled with their responsibility to make restitution toward their victims.
- Each of the survivors presented here cited education, love of life, and personal relationships as central components of their integration into post-Holocaust society. What might have been some other factors? ■

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