

Video Conference

Yad Vashem, Israel with
Mill Hill School, Derbyshire, UK



Mill Hill School

- In May of 2008, Mill Hill School was asked by Yad Vashem and the Holocaust Educational Trust to take part in an international video conference.
- The concept was to give British students the opportunity to listen to the testimony, and ask questions of a Holocaust survivor living in Israel.

Mill Hill School

- Mill Hill School has had an increasingly improving programme of Holocaust education
- All students in our Year 9 (13/14 years old) Religious Education lessons consider the Shoah in some detail as an extreme example of what happens when intolerance and prejudice take control.
- This is becoming an increasingly important issue to address due to the negative influence of British Nationalist groups and parties in the area of the school.

Mill Hill School

- The study of the Holocaust is also a compulsory element of the History curriculum at Key Stage 3 (pupils aged 11-14) since 1991.
- Years 12 and 13 students (16-18 years old) have taken part in the Holocaust Educational Trust's Lessons from Auschwitz Project for the last 4 years and part of their feedback has included inviting survivors to speak to both staff and their peers.

The Conference

- 16th October 2008
- 1:30 – 3:00pm UK time
- 12 students (17-18 years old)
- Survivor speaker: Masha Greenbaum

Preparation of Students

- Small group of 12 chosen from tutor recommendations
- Brief notes on the Survivor were sent by Yad Vashem and shared with students
- Students were then asked to write questions which were sent to Yad Vashem in advance

Preparation of Students

- *Survivor profile sent in advance by Yad Vashem:*

Survivor Details:

Masha Greenbaum

Masha Greenbaum was born in Kovno, Lithuania. During the war she lived for two years under the Soviet occupation and later under the German occupation in the Kovono Ghetto. The Germans deported her to forced labour and concentration camps in Estonia and Germany. She was liberated by the British army in Bergen-Belsen

She lived in Mexico and Great Britain and came to Israel in 1967. Today she lives in Jerusalem with her husband. She has children and grandchildren. Masha wrote a book about her experiences during the Holocaust.

Preparation of Students

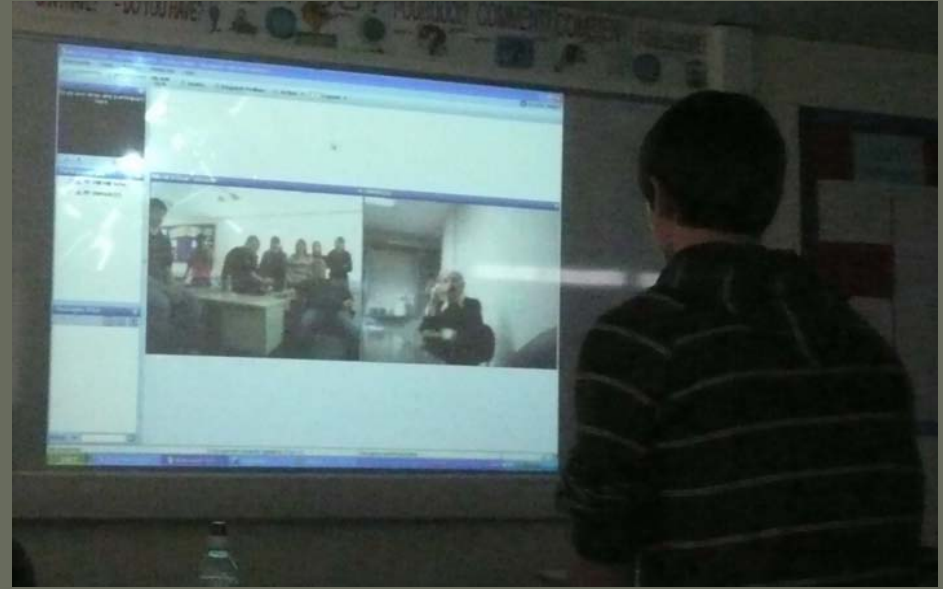
Questions prepared by the students:

1. What happened to the rest of your family during and after your time in the Ghetto?
2. Looking back, did you feel safer under the Soviet Occupation?
3. Did you feel like a victim during this time?
4. After liberation, did you continue to experience any prejudice or discrimination?
5. What differences were there between the Soviet and German occupations?
6. How did you get from the Kovono Ghetto to Bergen-Belsen camp?
7. Why do you want to share your story today?
8. How long have you been sharing your story?
9. How long did you spend in the camps?
10. What made you travel to Mexico first, then Britain and finally Israel after the war?
11. Did your experiences affect your faith? Do you think God deserted you during the Holocaust?
12. How did you feel at the moment of liberation?

Preparation of Students

- On the day of the conference, the Head of Education at HET, Kay Andrews, led a session with the students which focused on the Holocaust in general as well as the situation in Lithuania specifically
- Students were also asked to consider the use of terms such as 'perpetrator' and 'by-stander' and how such distinctions can become problematic.
- This time gave the class greater insight into the Holocaust and allowed them the opportunity to prepare themselves for the testimony they were to hear later.

The Conference



The Conference



What went well?

- Choice of students and the small group size
- Preparation done by school and HET
- Questions written by students
- Interest and response shown during the testimony and afterwards
- Enthusiasm of the students involved
- 'Hot-seating' of students for their questions
- Clarity of survivor's story and answers

Student Feedback:

- *“The background on Masha was helpful, although it could have been in more depth”*
- *“Technical problems with the sound did hinder the start of Masha’s talk”*
- *“Being able to ask questions was really good. I feel I know more about how the victims themselves felt and it gave me a new perspective on the Holocaust.”*
- *“Masha’s story was extremely inspirational and should be spread. It inspires me to stop complaining about the measly things going on in my life and to help those who suffer far worse than me. Ignorance is not bliss for those who suffer as a result”*
- *“There were a few technical difficulties but they were well sorted out. The testimony was very interesting and something that people definitely need to know about”*
- *“Masha is a very brave lady and I am really grateful that she shared her experiences”*

Student Feedback:

- *“The experience was very insightful and helped us to understand more about the Holocaust”*
- *“The technology could have been better”*
- *“I believe it would be worthwhile for other students to hear testimonies like this one. It is an experience I won’t forget and it makes you realise that hundreds of numbers mean far less than seeing and hearing a real person”*
- *“When the technical difficulties were rectified, Masha’s story was clear and the questions and answers went very well”*
- *“The experience reinforced the fact that the past should never be forgotten so that it is not ‘doomed to repeat itself’ and that there is a personal story behind every fact and figure”*

Logistical Issues:

1. IT specialists need to be involved from the beginning
2. A time line for test dates etc needs to be established
3. Tests need to take place well in advance of the conference
4. The quality of the sound is much more important than the picture
5. The room used needs to be quiet and undisturbed during the conference
6. Date for the conference needs to take into account holidays at both ends
7. Access to a land line with a speaker phone is essential – just in case!

Areas for improvement:

1. More information from Yad Vashem regarding survivor profile
2. More guidance on preparation and follow up work
3. More Information about school and students sent to Yad Vashem
4. Glossary of unfamiliar terms survivor may be using sent in advance
5. Age appropriate testimony detail needs to be considered
6. Clear links to work already being done in the UK need to be made
7. A clear rationale for how and why this programme is distinctive and unique

Areas for improvement:

- One improvement would be to create preparation information packs that both the school and Yad Vashem could complete and send to each other at the start of the process. These could include some or all of the following:
 - A set time line for the technical preparation to take place – test dates well in advance, passwords, usernames etc.
 - Student preparation material – information about the Holocaust in general as well as the specific situation and background information of the survivor involved
 - A glossary of Jewish and / or German terms that may be used within the testimony.
 - Some suggestions and guidance for students and staff regarding follow up work / activities / projects
 - Brief details of the school and community in general as well as the students involved
 - Questions written by the students in response to the information given

Conclusions:

- Meeting a survivor in person is the best way to experience such powerful testimonies, but when this is not possible the concept of a video conference is clearly the next best thing.
- It not only allows direct access to those from other countries to share their stories, but in the long term may also provide a way for those who find it increasingly difficult to travel to continue to share their important testimonies.

Conclusions:

- One important question to consider is how does this video conference style programme link with and compliment the many UK based survivors who regularly speak to British school students in person, including Mill Hill.
- The Yad Vashem based video link needs to offer something distinctive, a unique and challenging experience that builds on the work already being done in Britain.
- This could, for example, include focusing on the post war lives of the survivor and why / how they settled in Israel.

Conclusions:

- The conference was an extremely positive and rewarding experience for the students involved.
- For young people who on the whole don't travel far, the reality of having pictures of people in Israel appear in their classroom caused great excitement!
- They felt privileged to be involved and greatly valued the opportunity to interact personally with the survivor.