

Witness Theater

JDC Eshel's Theater Program for Holocaust Survivors

The Need

There are an estimated **200,000** Holocaust survivors living in Israel today – 40 pass away each day. The horrific experiences these individuals suffered some 75 years ago has left them to cope with deep trauma – few have adequately dealt with these traumas, and all carry the burden of living out their lives with these scars marring their golden years. In a matter of 10-15 years, there will no longer be living survivors who will be able to share their personal accounts with today's younger generation.

What has been lacking is a model that allows Holocaust survivors to deal with the painful memories and the traumas that they experienced during the Holocaust, a channel to share their unique experiences and come to terms with their past, and that can educate the younger generation as to the realities of their past experiences.

Program Description

JDC's Witness Theater program is an innovative intergenerational "journey" for Israeli Holocaust survivors and third generation Israeli high school students. Witness Theater offers a therapeutic process by which Holocaust survivors can come to terms with their past, spreading testimony through the retelling of their stories. The program aims to simultaneously provide catharsis for the survivor generation and connect them with their grandchildren's generation; thus passing on the memory of the Holocaust to a new audience.

Over the course of a year, the group works together in weekly meetings during which the two generations expose the jarring stories of survival and explore issues of trauma. Using theater workshop, props, lighting and music, participants young and old undergo a process of transformation. Professionals guide the creative process and encourage free expression by both survivors and students. The project culminates in the production of a semi-professional public performance that dramatizes the survivors' stories – chronicling their memories and personal survival and showcasing.



To date more than **1,500** Israeli Holocaust survivors have participated in the program in **100** groups throughout Israel. The program model has further been adopted in both Germany and the United States.

Click on the following [link](#) to view a documentary of an Israeli production of Witness Theater which featured both Israeli and German Jewish Holocaust survivors and high-school participants from both countries.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIWht6omAsk>)

Goals

The Witness Theater program has two main aims:

- 1) To involve Holocaust survivors in a therapeutic process designed to help them come to terms with their past, which has implications far beyond the successful accomplishment of any particular performance.
- 2) Holocaust education, documentation and preservation: spreading personal testimony through the retelling of personal stories both in the drama therapy sessions and in the culminating public performances attended by numerous junior high school, high school students, family, friends and the general public.

Short Term Impact

1. Provide a therapeutic artistic process for survivors to share their stories and deal with their traumas.
2. Raise awareness of Holocaust survivors living in local communities and building relationships with them.
3. Establish momentum for the performances to gain a wider reach of Shoah memorial.

Long Term Impact

1. Improve Holocaust survivor's emotional wellbeing.
2. Enriching the lives of survivors by sharing their stories with the third generation.
3. Commemorate the stories of survivors' stories to young adults who will then pass their knowledge to the next generation.
4. Creating lasting relationships between young and older adults in their communities.

