

Holocaust Essay Contest Winner – High School

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Dear Granddad

You are a survivor, and I'm fifteen.

I'd really like to know your story.

I can carry it and other's forward to help make sure the Holocaust never happens again. But so many years later, you're still the same man. You still think of everyone else first, you still always look on the bright side of life, and you still refuse to look back, only thinking about what good the future might bring. Sixty-two years later, our family only knows bits and pieces about the horrors of what you went through – the fact that you lost both of your parents and your brother. You just don't talk about the anguish of facing death everyday, or about the death camps. Yet I believe that the world has learned more about tolerance not just from history books, but also from the individual, personal stories of real people who were victims of the deepest hatred and what can never be repeated in the world. You're 78. So, now, Granddad, it's time for you to tell your story.

I would like to be able to say that the Holocaust could never happen again, but I'm not sure that's true. The state-sponsored hatred instilled in regular people against their neighbors by the Nazis – the boycotting, the Night of Broken Glass, The Nuremburg Laws – were the results of deep prejudice and fear (“An Introduction to the Holocaust,” “Kristallnacht”). Six million Jews (and many millions of others) were slaughtered (“An Introduction to the Holocaust”). These facts are part of our history. But the most powerful facts are those told on a personal

level. No matter how many museums I visit or books I read, it's the horrific tales of average people like Anne Frank that stick with me and my friends. When I saw all of the shoes piled up in the National Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. on my seventh grade trip, I could imagine the terrified people wearing them before the soldiers forced them to take them off and go to the gas chamber. Yet we have learned that hatred blinded Germans to the fact that Jews were human. Prejudice allowed them to ignore the pain and humiliation of the individuals they imprisoned and killed. It is the *stories* of real people that bring the individuals back into focus, and make their humanity stark and real. And it is our commitment to teaching tolerance and respect that helps us cling to hope for our future.

But the Holocaust happened so long ago in such a different part of the world that it is all too easy for us to dismiss it as something that happened once and could never happen again. If my whole generation believes this, then we may be doomed to repeat the unimaginable tragedy. We have seen already how easy it is to forget, to ban remembrance, as there are already millions, not even a century after, who deny the existence of the Holocaust (An Introduction to the Holocaust"). Many of these people are not evil, nor are they stupid; rather, they are apathetic, much like the citizens of Nazi Germany during the Second World War. As Primo Levi, a Jewish scientist and writer, asserted, "Monsters exist, but they are too few in number to be truly dangerous. More dangerous [is] the common man" (Palmer 855-856). We now know that it is the indifferent person who poses the biggest threat, the uninterested man or woman who puts world awareness and tolerance on the backburner. As genocide runs rampant in Africa, only a minority of Americans has taken any action. How sure can we be that a disaster on the scale of the Holocaust can never happen again when there appears to be one beginning right now? The

issue of Darfur should be a concern for everyone, yet our apathy is raising the death toll every day.

No one can be sure of the collective mindset of Nazi Germany. Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels was chillingly effective at convincing people of the dangers of Jews, putting out movies such as *The Eternal Jew*, a film comparing Jews to plague-carrying rats, and hanging posters containing false information that claimed to prove the superiority of Hitler's ideal and fake Aryan race ("The Nazi Holocaust 1938-1945", "The Final Solution"). Because of this, we know now how easy it is to make people afraid of other people. Surely there were many who easily caved in to such influences, but I know that there were those who stood up to such perversity of morals.

We now know that there must always be informed citizens and public watchdogs – the kind who were absent on that fateful day that the Nazis burned the government building, the *Reichstag*, and imposed martial law ("The *Reichstag* Burns"). Certainly there were some concerned people in Germany and around the world, but they were too few in number to make a large-scale difference. Today we have tried to build respect and tolerance for diversity into our schools, workplaces, and communities. Perhaps these efforts can help immunize our society against rampant intolerance against specific groups. This effort is not just a one-time lesson, but also an ongoing conversation about how to promote respect among diverse groups in every society.

The horrors of Nazi Germany can be taught in textbooks, but the more powerful human stories are what keep the memories truly alive. Just as the Japanese removed the Rape of Nanking from school textbooks, any dictatorial or belligerent government could wipe the Holocaust from our institutional memory ("Japanese confronted with war crimes past as films

recall the Rape of Nanjing”). It is the family that is the most fundamental unit of society and the basis of the community. It is the family, *our* family that can carry on tradition and legacy to do our part in preventing another Holocaust. And now in our family, there is some urgency in the matter.

Just like hundreds of thousands of other survivors, you have a story to tell. Sixty-two years after your liberation, an impressive life as a businessman, father, and grandfather, triple bypass surgery, and last year a stroke, it might be time to stop looking to the future as the constant guardian and accept the fact that other people have to take up the mantle. You are such an inspiration to me! I feel it is now the next generation’s duty to teach others about this disaster to prevent past intolerance and hatred from being perpetuated. Please don’t think of me as your nosy grandchild who needs to mind his own business; the world needs to hear your story, as it so desperately needs to be constantly reminded of what you and so many millions of others went through. Just as the common person is “more dangerous” than history’s infamous monsters, he or she is also infinitely more powerful in preventing such monsters from arising. The lessons of the Holocaust teach us that tolerance and respect help assure the dignity of individuals. We must keep the Holocaust in our consciences to prevent it from happening again, and you have the power to aid in that project.

So please, Granddad, share your story. Person to person, family to family, it is the human truths that persevere and go on to affect and inspire others to teach understanding.

When you’re ready, I’m here.

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