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### "The Guys"

McDonald's, I'm sure, is the last thing most would consider when reflecting on the Holocaust. Most, quite understandably, see no correlation whatsoever. Nonetheless, for me, one will forever summon images of the other.

My earliest memories of McDonald's are breakfasts with my family and a group of men known collectively as "the guys". Each morning, I remember walking into McDonald's, waving my hellos, grabbing an apple fritter, and plopping myself down to hear what jokes "the guys" had for me. There was always something new: the fish that hit a concrete wall and said, "Dam", the chicken and his many reasons for crossing the road, and so much knock-knocking any normal door would have collapsed long ago. But one morning, while waiting for the latest side-splitter, I noticed one of the guy's arms had an odd tattoo.

It was old, faded, but the numbers were still quite legible. Almost a decade later, I still remember the power of those numbers. This was not the optimistic tattoo sparked by wartime patriotism that I had seen on men of comparable age, but a malevolent stain. Even as an eight year old, I understood this tattoo meant something and that something was not good.

I didn't say anything then, but later I questioned my mother, and she told me he had it tattooed on him during something called the "Holocaust". She said a lot of "the guys" had them, and they would sometimes go to schools and talk about the tragedy of

the Holocaust. From what I could tell, the Holocaust sounded like jail, and I couldn't understand why such congenial and kind men, not to mention riotously funny, would be sent to jail. It would be years before I realized these men, my friends, epitomized the power and resiliency of the human spirit and had survived the single greatest evil the world has ever seen.

To these men, the Holocaust was not simply a terrible event in human history but a period of bitter loss and horrifying evil which forever altered their lives. It is hard to imagine the anguish, confusion, grief, and anger the survivors dealt with. To have teetered on the edge of extinction – knowing full well your existence is now the whim of madness – is an ordeal most of us struggle to even imagine. As Elie Wiesel said, "There are no words. Only those who were there know what it meant being there. And yet, we are duty bound to try" (*Elie Wiesel:...*). For those of us who have only experienced the Holocaust through family, friends, books, or school, a complete understanding is simply not possible. Yet, each and every one of us must, as Mr. Wiesel implored, *try*. By attempting to understand human potential, including both the good and the evil, we are combating the most complicit cause of the Shoah, apathy.

As the youth of today and the leaders of tomorrow, it falls to us to continue to preserve the memories and teach the history and lessons of the Holocaust. We must make sure the nightmares of yesterday do not become the realities of tomorrow. We must shape a future where genocide is a forgotten word, weeded from our lexicon by the absence of its physical manifestations. When compassion and mutual respect become the voices of our conscience, prejudice, discrimination and violence will finally end, and the promise of "Never Again" will have, at last, been kept.

Luckily, we find ourselves in an age where this is not only possible but also convenient. With the advent of the Internet, global social-networking and worldwide accessibility to the media, there are abundant forums for this personal and societal erudition. All over the world, the potential for thoughtful consideration to replace ignorance is there. Discussions on differing cultures, religions, histories, and basic humanity are no longer regional or national phenomena, and international awareness is more and more prevalent. We can maintain this progress through efforts such as remembrance clubs and activities, lesson plans that incorporate the humanity of survivors and – in the spirit of our tech-savvy generation – social-networking groups with the sole purpose of using the lessons of the Holocaust to combat bigotry, prejudice and hate. The end of intolerance and ignorance begins with each of us and is as individual as it is cultural.

However, the Internet is not a benign creature. It will take no small amount of focus and passion for us, the champions of empathy and humanity, to systematically and thoroughly combat the voices of hate that find asylum in the anonymity of the Web. Through this medium, the youth of the globe can share the memories and lessons of the Holocaust (as well as taking note of the experiences and history of others) and work to promote empathy, solidarity and education. When Elie Wiesel wrote we are all the sum total of those whose footsteps we now walk in, he understood tolerance must be the endgame of humanity (Wiesel). However, to succeed in this task we must rethink the way in which we educate our children and peers about the Holocaust.

I have heard it suggested that children should be scared into respecting the Holocaust, but if I recall, fear was used all too potently by Hitler. Frightening humankind

into action will not solve the problems of prejudice, discrimination and violence; it will legitimize the devices of evil, proliferating apathy. The heroism and selflessness of the more than 22,000 gentiles recognized as Righteous Among the Nations came not from fear, but from compassion ("The Righteous..."). The members of the Jewish Combat Organization, Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa, and the Jewish Military Union, Zydowski Zwiazek Wojskowy, who orchestrated the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, did not act out of fear but solidarity and humanity (United States Holocaust...). Fear is endemic to hate, and hate is a companion of genocide.

Remembering the Holocaust is a vocation of compassion. While it is true that before the Holocaust the world had never witnessed such unfettered and calculated hate, never too had humanity seen such resiliency of spirit and capacity for hope. The lesson of the Holocaust should not lay solely in its ruinous evil but should encompass the extraordinary bravery, optimism, and selflessness that defined its victims' struggles. We must not obsess on the depths of depravity but on the heights of compassion; not on where the desolate tracks of apathy end but on where the compassionate wings of empathy begin. By understanding this, we can inform our children on the realities of our world while instilling in them the optimism necessary to create a better tomorrow.

It has been almost ten years since I ate breakfast with "the guys". In that time four of them have died, and I moved away. Those who remain meet for breakfast, but, from what I hear, the jokes are becoming fewer and fewer. With the passing of each day, first-hand accounts of Holocaust survivors dwindle. It falls on us to make sure their memories and experiences do not fade with them. "Because I remember, I despair. Because I

remember, I have the duty to reject despair" (Abrams). We must remember for all those who suffered, and, just as importantly, we must remember for ourselves.

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