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Staring History in the Face

I gazed out at the vast, crowded room before me. The Annual Gathering of Remembrance is the largest gathering of Holocaust survivors in New York, and this year was no exception. I looked proudly out at the almost 2,000 witnesses to history who had gathered to commemorate what befell them and their families, despite a decline in Holocaust awareness in today's society. Unfortunately, most people today view the tragedy of the Holocaust as long-gone history. They study the mass murder, uprooting and torture of millions of Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, Communists and others in history books. The trouble with leaving the Holocaust in the past is that its message becomes less immediate; the barbarization of Europe sinks back into history. Many people in the Western world believe that a Holocaust could never happen again, or "not here." Yet such thinking led to indescribable horror only seventy years ago. We must all work to ensure that the Holocaust never becomes a series of facts in the textbook, because when we let that happen, we may see its echoes start to happen around us.

Having attended Jewish Day School through tenth grade, I listened to Holocaust survivors tell their stories many times. To my friends and me, having a survivor relative was nothing special. Therefore it took a powerful experience at my high school's Holocaust commemoration to remind me the importance of my personal connection to the Holocaust. Prior to the ceremony, both teachers and students submitted the names of their relatives who were killed in the Holocaust. During the ceremony, the whole school stood as the hundreds of names scrolled

down the projector screen. With a shock, I recognized the last names of my friends and teachers. My heart skipped a beat when I found my own family's names.

These were not just names of the dead. These were our own names!

Moved by the undeniable evidence of hundreds of familiar names, I sought to explore my own connection further. I had always known my grandfather went through the Holocaust, but I knew very little of the details. I was afraid of asking, and afraid of knowing the answers to my questions. When I found out about this essay contest, I finally decided to watch my grandfather's oral testimony from Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation. I have read many books and listened to survivors speak; therefore I didn't expect to be overly shocked by his words. But I found, as I watched my grandfather describe how the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele of Auschwitz selected new arrivals for either death or slave labor, that my mouth went dry. I had heard about Dr. Mengele countless times at school and in books. But it was a shock, somehow, to hear his name come out of my own grandfather's mouth. History had finally collided with my soft-spoken grandpa, and therefore with me. I understood more than ever now the importance of educating others about the Holocaust. People respond most to tragedy when confronted with a single name, a single face ("Survivor Stories"). I wanted my peers to understand that if a catastrophe like this could happen to my grandfather, it could happen to anyone.

Such catastrophes still do occur today, in the Congo, in Darfur and in other areas we probably don't even know about. Horrible crimes against humanity are occurring in our own generation. Atrocities we wouldn't have believed possible,

such as the Sudanese gang rape of girls as young as eight, occupy our newspapers (Woolf). But we have seen all this before. The horrors of the Nazi genocide included mass suffocations and shootings. My grandfather's six-year-old cousin was killed by a Nazi soldier's bayonet when his mother wanted to accompany her son on the Nazi roundup of the children (Krauze). Alarm bells should have gone off around the world when Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels announced, "We do not subscribe to the view that one should feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, or clothe the naked" ("Deadly Medicine"). Burning people in ovens sounds like it comes straight out of Hansel and Gretel. No one believed it in Hitler's day, either. "Only in fantasy" could Europe imagine the cremation of millions of people (Krauze). But we have known the truth about what people do to each other for decades. Now that the Holocaust has shown us what human nature is capable of, we cannot turn away from the terrible suffering in today's world.

These days, teachers and school officials constantly reinforce the messages of tolerance and pride in diversity. As students, we are hyper sensitized to possible racist comments, and I have seen classmates stand up for their homosexual friends. So I was rather nastily surprised when a girl in my school made a racial slur about Chinese people. I know she has several Asian friends, and if questioned, she would probably have said she didn't mean anything by the comment. But careless typifying can lead to real prejudice. For example, since Jews traditionally worked as moneylenders in medieval Europe, "Jewish money-lending" became an unconscious stereotype in twentieth-century Europe. This labeling led to the blaming of Jews for Germany's economic depression post-World War I, which in turn fueled anti-Semitic fervor in support of the Holocaust

("Holocaust: The Roots of the Holocaust"). Today's world has sadly not learned that categorizing people based on nationality leads to terrible consequences. One day at school I overheard two students talking about those "evil Germans" who perpetrated the Holocaust. Accusing all of Germany's population today of the crimes some Germans and some of other nationalities committed seventy years ago is no response to genocide. We must educate today's society that one's nationality does not define one's character. Declaring that all Germans were bad means deciding that all Jews were good. This insults the memory of the countless gentiles who risked their lives to save victims of the Nazis, as well as dangerously blanketing all Jews as good people. We must work to educate society about the human reality in the 1940's, and the reality about prejudice today. As part of that work, my mother has decided to show excerpts from my grandfather's testimony at our synagogue's Holocaust commemoration this year. No survivors spoke last year, and my family decided first-hand testimony had to be a part of this event. We must work to spread knowledge of genocide in our places of worship, in our schools, and everywhere we go.

The Annual Gathering of Remembrance helped thousands of people do just that. At the ceremony, hundreds of people sang an arrangement of the Hebrew poem "Eili, Eili":

Oh Lord, My God, I pray that these things never end the
sand and the sea, the rush of the waters, the thunder of the
heavens, the prayer of man.

A Jewish paratrooper named Hannah Szenes, who parachuted into Hungary to save fellow Jews during the Holocaust, penned this poem. She wrote “Eili, Eili” while surveying the landscape in the safety of her home in Israel, but I can’t help feeling struck by the universality of the poem’s language. If only everyone on Earth would recognize each other’s prayers, and remember history for its continued relevance.

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