

HOLOCAUST & HUMAN RIGHTS

ART & WRITING CONTEST 2023

HIGH SCHOOL ESSAY

FIRST PLACE

JESSE LAROSA

A War with Time

You are a student in school. “Take out your textbook,” your teacher instructs, and so you do.

Page 115: Tragedy. The “learning” begins; six million Jews, killed — two thirds of the population.

Approximately five million people from other minority groups, murdered. Victims of the Holocaust, subjected to “dehumanization and torture.” This is what the words of the textbook read.

But to the mother who woke up one day, not knowing it would be the last she would ever see her beloved son, her meaning of the word “Tragedy” is beyond the limitations of a textbook. To the boy who walked into a shower not knowing it would be his ultimate demise, believing we understand him through a simple statistic makes his lived experience a number. Over six million Jews, dead, your textbook may read, but what it cannot illustrate is the individual experiences of the six million people whose anguish no statistic can convey. A walk through hell — a summation. As you close your textbook, you might fulfill yourself by claiming that reading those numbers means you “learned”; in fact, it was one step closer to forgetting.

By taking the time to listen to Holocaust survivors’ testimonies, we take the first step towards truly understanding the Holocaust from an *emotional* level. By listening to people like Tova Friedman, whose loved ones in her ghetto were starved to death to make room for people on trains to concentration camps, the Holocaust is given authenticity. By hearing survivors like Mary Natan illustrate the time she saw the smoke of her burning friends shortly after they were told they were going to the crematorium for “special rations,” the Holocaust becomes real. Testimonies of people like Helen Colin, in which she details being stripped nude, shaved bald, and beaten for hiding a picture of her

parents in her mouth, give validity to horrors that no statistic can. Until we expose ourselves to the personal accounts of the Holocaust through survivors, we undermine the individual experiences of the people who lived to tell their story.

We are at war with time. A war with forgetting. As the Holocaust becomes an event that drifts further into our past, it becomes increasingly difficult to keep it a conversation of the present. We are at a war with time, a war with forgetting, and our only defense is remembrance. For the mother who woke up one day, not knowing it would be the last she would ever see her beloved child, it is up to us to fight the war with time *for* her. For the boy who walked into a shower not knowing it would be his ultimate demise, it is up to us to educate ourselves *for* him. For the next generation of children, it is up to us to ensure *we* do not fail to remember so that *they* do not have a Holocaust to suffer. As Elie Wiesel once said, “to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time.”

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SECOND PLACE

REBECCA ZHANG

If there's one thing that can be learned from *Night*, it's that we exist for each other. Elie Wiesel explains that his memoir both honors the past and calls upon the future. He compels us to not forget the voices of victims and survivors from the past *and* present. It's our social responsibility to understand them so as to uphold the promise of "Never Again".

The testimonies of Holocaust Survivors allow them to share their stories and inspire understanding, which is especially significant because vast numbers of people continue to deny the death of millions. Wiesel writes, "to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time" (18). He explains that by forgetting, we allow the Nazis to design a history that doesn't speak of their horrific crimes, one that may even deem them champions. If we forget the victims, we seal *their* histories. We become accomplices to the Nazis' vision of "[leaving] behind a world in ruins in which Jews would seem never to have existed" (11). But, by listening and understanding a Survivor's experience, we memorialise and honor those who perished.

Additionally, the testimonies of Survivors like Wiesel are valuable because they provide insight that's deeper than history. Their deepest thoughts and emotions demonstrate the immense impact of the Holocaust on individuals. Wiesel opens himself to the reader when he records, "I shall never forgive myself. Nor shall I ever forgive the world...for having awakened in me the basest, most primitive instincts" (14). His feelings in this passage are probably not something we relate to, but his words allow us to understand that what Elie witnessed in the Kingdom of Death caused him to be racked by intense guilt and anger. We derive from his memory, a theme: the Holocaust strived to strip people of their humanity.

That's why memoirs contrast history; the latter states cold facts and statistics and can only achieve shallow awareness. On the other hand, memoirs provoke deep understanding because they're personal; they tell the stories of people who lived and experienced like us.

Understanding that such atrocious things happened to someone who has as much soul as ourselves is a stark reminder that we must actively prevent history from repeating. And, becoming a witness to a Survivor's testimony is a prerequisite to becoming someone who upholds "Never Again". Wiesel proclaims, "Human suffering anywhere concerns men and women everywhere" (145). He says that as long as there remains even a single person in plight, our lives are not free of anguish, because...

We exist for others. The lives of oppressed people depend on our actions, just like the authenticity of our freedoms depends on their lives. Collectively, we shall never achieve freedom or peace unless it extends everywhere. We must let those who face oppression and plight "know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them" (145). Yet, the only way to do so, the only way to fulfill the promise of "Never Again", is to *never forget*.

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HIGH SCHOOL ESSAY

THIRD PLACE

JIACHEN CAO

Most Formidable Equation: Words + Timing = Reality

Deportation. Blood. Hunger. Torture. Iniquity. Death. The list goes on. Combine the countless wicked elements on the list, you might — just might — get a glimpse of the Holocaust. What caused this appalling atrocity?

Many brand hatred as the notorious rationale behind Hitler's immorality while others denounce fascism and aryanism. While these interpretations are not erroneous, there exists a time bomb — buried deeper than any of these reasons — that single-handedly detonated the Holocaust. Curiously, this time bomb manifests itself as an equation:

$$\text{Words} + \text{Timing} = \text{Reality.}$$

Let's begin with words. Words are not real; they are figments of our imagination. I cannot touch a "discrimination" or taste a "superiority" like how I can pick up an apple or savor a cheesecake. Paradoxically, the subjective nature of words makes them even more perilous. While objective matters such as guns merely exist, subjective entities such as discrimination and superiority are capable of *influencing* reality. Hitler was a master at wielding words to dictate reality.

"By defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord", proclaims Hitler in *Mein Kampf*. These words were not the physical weapons that were used against the Jewish people, yet they gave rise to the horrors we know today. If Hitler taught us anything with his hateful speech, it is that words are not powerful in themselves but potent in their influence.

However, words on their own are not enough. Imagine this: Adolf Hitler reciting a sentimental, anti-Semitic speech in Ancient Rome during Pax Romana — arguably the most peaceful period in human history. Instead of perceiving him as a charismatic savior, the Romans would most likely regard Hitler as a ludicrous zealot. Why? Because the timing is wrong.

While the Roman people during Pax Romana were captivated by chariot races and gladiator combats, the German people in the 1930s were tormented by hyperinflation and severe unemployment. Hitler exploited this opportunity and rendered the Jewish people scapegoats.

Hence, the formula is complete: Fascist Words + Time of Crisis = Holocaust.

In the 21st century, many perceive the world as a Pax Romana replica. Humans seem not preoccupied with warfare and genocide but enthralled by TikTok and artificial intelligence. Moreover, contemporary extremists are merely bloviating fanatics who are incomparable to Hitler's madness and power.

This perspective is specious. Let us bear in mind that Hitler was an insignificant political figure until he became significant. If you time-travel back to 1920 — 13 years before Hitler assumed Führerprinzip — and ask a stranger at Potsdamer Platz who Adolf Hitler is, they would be clueless.

Today, the Abu Sayyaf Group threatens to establish an independent Islamic State regardless of the means; Al Shabaab rejects all religious doctrines other than the Shariah Law; Hezbollah is prepared to bring hellfire if needed to overthrow the Israel Defense Forces. If we are tempted to trivialize the words and threats of these seemingly paltry extremists, let us not forget the most formidable equation embossed by Adolf Hitler in human history. Ever.

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HONORABLE MENTION

REBECCA ADLER

The Simplicity of Extremism

“If your friends jump off a bridge will you?” I've heard this saying countless times as I narrate the ins and out of teenage peer pressure. While this is far from the Holocaust, the polarizing experience of disagreeing requires leaving your comfort zone, and realizing the value of words. During the Holocaust, bystanders were often forgiven because the whole world was going one way, and they would be just one person against the grain- useless. The Holocaust teaches us exactly the opposite, your words can make more of a difference than you can imagine. It teaches us the effects of language, and a herd mentality, through the world's reaction to Hitler and his beliefs.

Anti-semitism existed before Hitler, and had effects on society, yet his blatant okayness with hate demonstrated to the world that it's okay to commit such atrocities. Hitler was a perfect example of how words can change the world, both positively and negatively. With just words, Hitler was able to win enough power, to ultimately wipe out 6 million Jews. Hitler didn't just magically fly into power, he was elected and made his way to the top- maybe not cleanly but still he did. Words are ideas, as words spread so do concepts. In oversimplified, terms, Hitler made anti-semitism “cool”, and when the people in charge, the “popular people” said it was right, who could deny it?

Although the Holocaust isn't on the same plane- Hitlers impact is scarily similar with the analogy of a group of teenagers. People, especially young ones, can be cruel, and when there are no repercussions, cruelty not only continues, but it grows and festers. Hitler essentially behaved like a poorly disciplined teenager who set the basis of extremism, and hate today. Hitler was a

bully, and even those who didn't agree, didn't want to be the victim. The idea that Jews were to blame for the state of the world grew, and anti-semitism became the "way to be". Hitler spread his ideas charismatically enough to result in a genocide. Hitler didn't appear hateful as he came into power. He had enough charisma to eventually convince most of the world mass murder would solve all their problems. Understanding this is key to keeping hate groups from spreading. The Nazis started as a political party, but changed the world. Seeing how Hitler's words were not "just words" can help protect us from the words of extremists and hate groups today.

Status quo is undeniably attractive, but if maybe a few more people had set out against the Nazis, at any point, the genocide could be less extreme. Without the Holocaust to set an example of just how powerful these group's words, and actions can be, there would be no way of telling if this hate will overcome our world. With the phrase "never forget" we can implement what we've learned from Hitler, his power, and humans as a species to ensure the safety of people to the best of our abilities.