

1st Place (tied) Junior Essay
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Choices

“I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.” (Elie Wiesel) This powerful quote is presented to us by a survivor of one of history’s most substantial genocides: the Holocaust. This stain in our history exterminated over eleven million people, simply because the Nazi party used Jews and several other ethnic groups as scapegoats to explain their WWI defeat, and ultimately their economic downfall. The Holocaust is an extremely emotional subject for many, due to the merciless dehumanization that ensued.

Many people ask themselves what they would have done in such a situation, and several choose to believe they would have done what we now know as “the right thing,” but if that decision was so simple, then why wasn’t such unconditional help and kindness available to those faced with the horrors of the concentration camps? If such a horrendous event were to happen again in our modern lives, would the same decision to risk one’s own life and the lives of others *really* be easy to make, or would such an ethical dilemma silence so many people once again?

Many people living through such a tragic genocide had to make several moral and ethical decisions. Those individuals could turn in a Jew or anyone else hiding from the Nazis, lessening the risks of being taken to camps themselves, but costing others their lives. Conversely, those people could stay quiet and refrain from turning anyone in, as well as protecting themselves and those in hiding, but creating a worse situation for those already imprisoned by refusing to speak. Of course these conflicted individuals could choose to

help those in hiding, putting themselves and family members in danger, but fighting against an obvious injustice.

As history regrettably reveals, it was among popular opinion that Jews, as well as homosexuals, political prisoners, and others who weren't of a "pure" race were responsible for the defeat of the Central Powers in WWI, and therefore were blamed for the terrible economy that the defeated allies were experiencing. As history has often shown, the human race tends to need a reason to explain its losses. For the Germans and other Central Powers, Jews and other groups were blamed for military defeat and economic destruction. As members of these persecuted groups went into hiding, several Aryans had to make decisions as to how they would react.

An unfortunate popular decision among those sheltered from the Nazis was to turn in Jews and other "undesirables" to concentration and execution camps. This malevolent decision protected the practitioner and their family, but was heinously evil in its nature, and possibly even crueler in its motive. Today, even with our past knowledge, it is likely that thousands of citizens would turn in those who were in hiding, simply to guarantee personal security. This selfish need for safety has often outweighed our own humanity. This destruction of equality is exactly what killed eleven million human beings. It is human nature to protect ourselves and our families, but it becomes a curse, our own corruption, when this personal need steals life and liberty from millions of others.

On the other hand, there were many liberators and other advocates who stood up for those being hunted down. These people hid Jews in their homes, liberated camps, and worked from the inside to help suffering individuals. Dame Mary Barraco was a rescuer who was caught and tortured in Nazi prison cells. In these situations, it is inviting for the human spirit to collapse, and this destruction of will was exactly what the Nazis wanted to happen to those who opposed them. Despite being sterilized, tortured, and learning her fiancé was executed, Barraco went right back to work for the Resistance upon her release

from a Nazi prison. People like her, the truly good people, are what saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of people who otherwise would have been executed or worked to death.

A safe, seemingly logical decision was to stay quiet. Many people believed this would be a foolproof way to guarantee their safety as well as the individuals in hiding. It does seem like a simple plan: don't sell out your neighbors, and don't sell out members of a persecuted party. This wavering mediocrity was exactly what allows individuals to deny such a horrendous genocide took place. Telling so many traumatized people who were captured, tortured, and saw their own families murdered, that none of what they experienced was true, is as bad as what Nazis did to millions of people. We need to accept the truth of what happened so we can prevent such murder from happening again, so we can stand up for what we believe in, rather than sitting and allowing oppressors to procure genocide.

It is these personal ethics and our own moral compasses that truly guide our decisions in the face of adversity. Elie Wiesel famously claimed, "For the dead and the living, we must bear witness." This simple yet touching statement tells us that we can't sit in silence and allow the world's problems to pass over our heads. It is our duty as humans to stand up for what we believe. Silence can be more destructive than noise, especially in a situation like this.