

Work Makes You Free

“Arbeit macht frei.” These seemingly harmless yet repulsively ironic German words, which are translated as “work makes you free,” welcomed millions of Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexuals, and other ‘undesirables’ as they entered concentration camps during the Holocaust. This ominous phrase indirectly refers to freedom as death. Approximately eleven million people were unjustifiably murdered during the Holocaust. About six million Jews were mercilessly slaughtered. Hundreds of thousands of children’s lives were ended by the Nazis, and with them died their potential. During his trip to Auschwitz with Oprah Winfrey, Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel questioned, “How many Nobel Prize winners died at the age of one... two?... One of them could have discovered the remedy for cancer, for AIDS. The great poets. The great dreamers.” The macabre events that occurred during the Holocaust give us more than nightmares, however. They offer us inspiration to make our world a better place and prevent such ordeals from repeating in the future. The Holocaust reminds us to carefully watch our thoughts, affects our feelings and behavior, and motivates us to stand up against the horrors of humankind.

Inspirational leader Mahatma Gandhi once warned, "Carefully watch your thoughts, for they become your words. Manage and watch your words, for they will become your actions. Consider and judge your actions, for they have become your habits. Acknowledge and watch your habits, for they shall become your values. Understand and embrace your values, for they become your destiny." Germans before and during the Holocaust epitomize what Gandhi meant in this powerful statement. Many Germans had silently blamed Jews for betraying Germany in World War I and for Germany’s economic dilemmas; however, their silence eventually turned

into words and actions. Just during Kristallnacht, or the “Night of Broken Glass,” about 7,500 Jewish-owned shops were attacked and robbed, and over 265 synagogues were destroyed. Maltreating Jews had, as Gandhi said, “become [their] destiny.”

Although the evil that transpired during Adolf Hitler’s reign remains the same, those who hear about the Holocaust react differently. While some devote their lives to spreading awareness of the Nazis’ horrific acts, others deny the Holocaust ever existed. According to a survey by the Anti-Defamation League, while 54% of Earth’s population has heard of the Holocaust, only a third of our population actually believes that it occurred and is accurately described. Many believe the death toll was exaggerated, while others believe it is simply a myth.

Unlike the Holocaust deniers, I know the accounts of the Holocaust are true, and my life is greatly affected by these stories. They have changed my perception of others, life, and human dignity. The oppression and pain that Holocaust victims suffered is unimaginable. My hunger is nothing compared to the hunger depicted in photographs of emaciated children in concentration camps. What I believe is cold is nothing compared to the freezing temperatures those in death camps endured with neither coats nor blankets to keep them warm. After learning of the heinous acts of Adolf Hitler, the Nazis, and their collaborators, I am determined to treat every human life with the love and respect it deserves. People are people no matter what faith, gender, sexual orientation, handicaps, or ethnicity.

As I continued to learn about the Nazis’ cruelty, I was filled with realization. Every day, in school and in our lives, we witness acts similar to those of the Nazis, but on a smaller scale. Like the Jews and other ‘undesirables,’ people who are considered different by society today are being treated unfairly and bullied. Holocaust victims were locked in gas chambers, where Zyklon

B, a highly poisonous insecticide, was released. The prisoners were deprived of oxygen and suffered approximately fifteen minutes of suffocation before slipping into the peace of death. Likewise, those who are bullied today are sent to life's gas chambers. They are deprived of happiness, and eventually, lives are taken. According to the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, over 4,400 young people commit suicide every year, and according to a British study, at least half of these are related to bullying.

While I cannot change what happened during the Holocaust, I can fight to ensure that such cruelty does not repeat itself. Anne Frank wrote, "What is done cannot be undone, but one can prevent it [from] happening again." More importantly, I can stop injustices in my everyday life. During the Holocaust, everyone knew what was going on, yet very few people stood up on behalf of the victims. The same goes for today, but I can change that. I cannot eliminate bullying everywhere, but I can start by ending it in my school and community one step at a time.

The Holocaust exemplifies why we should monitor our thoughts, affects our feelings and actions toward others, and inspires us to stand up for what is right. If we join together as a human family to speak out against injustice now, we can prevent the Holocaust from repeating itself in our world and in our communities. We can speak out against bullying and any other injustices in our everyday lives. Freedom and work in "arbeit macht frei" do not have to be perceived as death and labor. If we work against injustice, we will remain free; therefore, work makes us free. As the number of Holocaust survivors continues to dwindle, it is our role as the next generation to grab the survivors' reins and spread their stories of the Holocaust to the generations to come. I challenge everyone alive today and in the future to grab these reins and work to end injustice once and for all.