

1st Place Junior Essay
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Facing Our Past Evils to Build a Better Future

How could one man rally a country to commit atrocities against an entire nation? How could ordinary people, like our parents, teachers, and siblings, be so blinded by their own pain and prejudice? Where does that evil come from, and is it in all of us? How do we keep such catastrophes from happening again? The Holocaust is one of the greatest modern tragedies, an entire two-thirds of the population of European Jews were murdered. The level of cruelty and turpitude is almost unfathomable. Survivor testimonies of suffering and heartbreak could bring one to tears. For this reason, these events must be kept close to our hearts. Furthermore, it is necessary to keep this history alive through survivor testimony, evidence, and education; because eyewitness testimony connects on a raw profound level in the human psyche, but without evidence and education, history itself can be dismissed or denied.

Education is critical because it prevents the Holocaust from falling from the collective mind of society. In the United States, all children must attend school in some fashion. In this, we have the opportunity to educate this generation truly about the Holocaust and the psychological regression to savage cruelty and deceit behind it. Elie Wiesel says in the preface of his book, *Night*, that with his testimony, he has become a witness with a moral obligation to attempt to “prevent the enemy from enjoying one last victory by allowing his crimes to be erased from human memory.” Although it is quite obvious that children at some point in their academic career should learn about the Holocaust, the true question is when? And how? The horrors of concentration camps and gas chambers, the starvation and illness, and the cruelty and evil are much to behold for most elementary school-aged children. The potential for serious trauma, particularly with more perceptive and empathetic children is well-founded. However, instilling values in children and teaching them the lessons from the Holocaust builds a foundation for tolerance, respect, and love. Educated children are less likely to be deceived by

unaccountable sources. Doctor Donna Matthews answers the questions posed in her article's title, "How should you talk to your child about the Holocaust?" with the following advice: once youth mature and develop their reasoning and resilience they can understand the complexity of the political and historical context that led to the Holocaust. Knowing the psychological justification and moral degeneration behind the evil is critical to awareness and prevention in the present. As long as the history and lessons about the Holocaust are delivered in a clear but sensitive manner to teens, and properly reflected upon with teachers and parents, adolescents will understand and remember the relevance of the tragedy throughout their lives and continue to teach its lessons.

The evidence is essential to vindicate any historical event and, therefore, the physical aspects must be accounted for. When a catastrophe like genocide occurs, and there is someone to be held responsible, it is the natural inclination of most people, especially those who had ties to the culpable group/oppressor, to deny it ever happened. Because the Holocaust was kept so secret and done so efficiently to the degree that the Nazis had perfected it, people had difficulty comprehending the reality. It is only natural to use denial as a way to evade cognitive dissonance, especially as a German citizen in 1945. Unfortunately, these emotional responses, while understandable, are dangerous in the long term. People who continue to deny history are only responding to information that aligns with their ideology and hatred; but, this small percentage of people cannot reflect our nation or the rest of the world. Most people who see physical evidence and survivor testimony do accept these facts. In the defining case of *Mermelstein vs. the IHR (Institute for Historical Review)*, Patrick Sauer wrote in his article, "Mel Mermelstein Survived Auschwitz, then Sued Holocaust Deniers in Court," that it was recognized by the United States' judge that the Holocaust did occur, as if we needed that confirmation. The mere existence of these Holocaust deniers demands that we keep museums and memorials open and well known. The life work of Mermelstein as a Holocaust survivor was to document the Holocaust. He visited different extermination camps on 40 separate occasions and opened a Holocaust museum, according to

Sauer. Mermelstein had the evidence, the artifacts, and the documents; but, these only matter once people are allowed to properly open their minds to what is clearly and directly in front of their faces. The evidence for the Holocaust is plentiful and available, for now. Data naturally decays, events become fuzzy, and eventually irrelevant, the older and seemingly less relatable they become to the newer generation; but, hard evidence is no legend. The more documentation, the less hearsay, and vague stories, the more likely people are to understand primarily its existence and secondly its relevance.

Witness and survivor testimonies are critical to human experience because numbers do not penetrate our hearts; people do. Thus, the most important part of keeping the Holocaust relevant is connecting to youth, the new generation, through eyewitness testimony. "The witness has forced himself to testify. For the youth of today, for the children who will be born tomorrow. He does not want his past to become their future," writes Elie Wiesel in the preface of *Night*. Wiesel expresses the reality that the past will repeat itself if the next generation does not remember their history. Disengagement and disconnection blind young people from the truths of the Holocaust. The statistics *are* frightening but abstract. Eyewitness testimony transforms how anyone sees an issue; it makes something rather complex and inconceivable in young minds solid and alive. Elly Orrin, describing the terror, said the constant fear that she felt "grabs (one) by the throat." She felt threatened for her very being, the "Boots of Terror" were heard at every turn. She was petrified that the SS would trap her and her family in Razia. Her words touched me deeper than any statistics ever could, and built a bridge into the past.

Eyewitness testimony connects with the human psyche on a visceral level. Without evidence and education, the Holocaust can drift into obsolescence. Education is critical to memory. Emphasis on the moral ramifications and social/political context is especially important because it trains the youth to recognize parallels in current events. Physical evidence is the foundation upon which we establish the truth. Lastly, survivor testimony connects us to the tragedy in a genuine and heartbreaking way. It is what truly makes Holocaust history relevant and what reveals its importance. The Holocaust has shown

us the deep evil that we are capable of, and we cannot risk ignorance, which increases the likelihood of repeating the suffering and chaos. "History, despite its wrenching pains, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be faced again," as Maya Angelou beautifully stated. If we face the shameful realities of our past, and accept our terrifying capabilities in the present, we can resist evil and create a hopeful future.