

2nd Place Junior Essay
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Value beyond Measure

In my 13 years of life, I have learned only snippets of information about the Holocaust and World War II. This information was never enough. I was both fascinated and horrified by the Holocaust and always yearned to learn more. No matter what I was taught, however, I simply could not and cannot fathom what drove Hitler to attempt genocide. Why were the Jews evil in his eyes? What had they done to deserve this? Why were they inferior? The simple answer is that there was no real reason. There was no real reason for six million Jews to be killed. There was no real reason for the six years of death, suffering, loss, and misery. Those who were fortunate enough to have survived the Holocaust and World War II emerged with extraordinary stories to tell, tragedies to mourn, and lessons to teach. Their words are more valuable than any Holocaust fact or statistic. It is crucial to learn about Holocaust witness and survivor testimonies because they present more than simply facts, and they allow us to study further the true causes of these historical atrocities and how they can be prevented from happening in the future. In addition to analyzing the tremendous value in Holocaust eyewitness testimony, I would also like to take this opportunity to delve into a particular survivor's account whose story teaches remarkable lessons about the tragedies of the Holocaust.

First, a witness's or survivor's testimony is important to learn because it provides information far beyond what is offered in textbooks or on websites, which ultimately holds the greatest value. The narratives of Holocaust survivors and witnesses are stories of personal experiences of loss, suffering, pain, reunions, and joy. They often teach us about tragedies or lessons that we were not previously aware of, or those too gruesome to talk about. These emotions cannot be measured or collected by historians or scientists. They are feelings that can only be shared from those who actually experienced the Holocaust. Holocaust survivor, Dana Cohen, shared one of her most frightful experiences in Siberian

labor camp, in the UJFT's Holocaust Commission's "What We Carry" film. During the cold Arctic winters, the prisoners were forced to bury the dead bodies in the snow. One morning, after spring had arrived and melted the snow, a hungry dog came running through the camp with a human arm in his mouth. She had a sick feeling that it was the arm of someone she knew. She was right. When people went back to bury the boy in the dirt later that spring, she discovered that he was missing various limbs, that she guessed had been eaten by hungry dogs. She described this experience by saying, "I witnessed this. This was one of the most horrible things, ever, really, which I have experienced." Without her testimony, we might not have ever known that prisoners often saw hungry dogs, just as skinny and starved as the prisoners, running through the labor camps with human remains. Sadly, some recognized family or friends being devoured by these dogs without the chance to be properly buried after an untimely demise. Cohen's words demonstrate that true pain and misery of those in the camps, which extended far beyond physical suffering. Her story illustrates the sheer desperation of everyone, including animals, during the Holocaust. Eyewitness accounts, even those unrelated to the Holocaust, are important because they teach what cannot be taught, put into a graph or chart, measured, or collected. They instead give us words of wisdom more powerful than those of any professional.

Second, a witness's or survivor's testimony is important in order to identify the roots of mass genocides and other horrific events like the Holocaust. These individuals bear witness to the horrors of genocide, including the ghettos, concentration camps, mass exterminations, displacements, loss, and many other cruelties worse than anything we can imagine. As a result, witnesses and survivors can illuminate the source of this evil, which can be traced to hatred, bigotry, toxic and uncontrolled propaganda, nationalism, totalitarianism, and dictatorship. These ideas are not new. They have been present in our society for centuries in everything from slavery to the Bosnian War. It is heartbreaking that it took such a large-scale monstrosity to realize what we had been oblivious to for so long. Perhaps one of the most dominating causes, however, is submissiveness, which Holocaust survivor Hanns

Loewenbach elucidates by saying that “Evil does not need your help, only your indifference.” This quote is one of many from Holocaust survivors and witnesses. They all seem to relay a similar message: Hate and evil, in itself, is not the entirety of the problem. Those who let hate and evil prevail are the problem. World War II and the Holocaust would not have escalated to the scale they did had there been more resistance to Hitler’s ideology and agenda, and less unchecked hatred. These lessons, among many others, are extremely valuable and can only be found in eyewitness testimony. What happened during the Nazis’ reign cannot be allowed to die. It must be shared and learned from. Identifying these causes is the first step in working to ensure that history does not repeat itself.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to share the story of Bill Jucksch, a decorated American soldier who fought the Nazis and discovered and liberated the Gunskirchen Lager death camp. Without a doubt, his story is one that best teaches about the tragedies and lessons of the Holocaust. Born in McAllen, Texas, on October 29, 1925, Bill Jucksch was a soldier at heart. He spent most of his childhood in Neosho, Missouri, and he willingly enlisted in the U. S. Army in his senior year at Neosho High School. At the time of his enlistment, World War II was raging. Jucksch joined General Patton’s 3rd Army in France and later fought in Germany and Austria with the same group. He served as a Forward Observer and Infantry Liaison Radio Operator in the 71st Infantry Division. After that, Jucksch served as the radioman in a 4-man group of communication persons in the 5th Infantry Regiment. It was here, at the end of April 1945, that he discovered and helped liberate the death camp Gunskirchen Lager. At the time, it held nearly 10,000 dying Jewish prisoners. He passed away in November 2017 after receiving countless awards for his service. You may be wondering why I chose Jucksch, as he was not a Holocaust survivor. However, this is the exact reason that I chose him. Unlike the Jews and other anti-Nazis who were forced into concentration camps and ghettos, Jucksch had a choice. He had a good life in America. The war was not in his country nor did it concern him, yet he still chose to serve. Jucksch did not hesitate and did not need money or praise for his work. He did it because he knew it was right. Not only does his

story teach about the lessons of the Holocaust, but also the tragedies of Hitler's heartless actions. As many know, the Nazis' extermination operation was kept somewhat quiet for quite some time. Not many knew of the concentration and death camps, which were isolated from the rest of society in very rural parts of Poland. The Allied nations were not aware of Hitler's secret plan until the Soviets discovered Majdanek concentration camp in July 1944. Even then, supreme Allied commander Dwight D. Eisenhower refused to believe that the Nazis had built death camps and were carrying out mass exterminations without seeing it for himself. The fact that most did not know that Jews and many others were being killed by the thousands is a tragedy in itself. Let alone the fact that there was widespread disbelief, even after the discovery of the first Nazi concentration camp. As a result, Jucksch's discovery must have come as quite a shock. Nonetheless, he is still a hero, and we can learn much from his values of service, commitment, and morality.

All in all, due to their importance not only to the study of history but to our understanding of the suffering and loss that accompanies the Holocaust, witnesses' and survivors' testimonies must be preserved and learned from. It is prodigious that, although these individuals share stories of pain and suffering, they still promote the ideas of forgiveness, kindness, and peace. That is true character. Even as we are losing eyewitnesses, we must continue to keep Holocaust history relevant, whether through museums or by introducing more Holocaust history in the curriculums or course requirements for public schools. Education is the only way to protect future generations and ensure that we shape more open-minded, kind-hearted, and accepting individuals. We can only hope that history cannot repeat itself as long as it is not forgotten and continues to be faced head-on with abiding courage.

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