

3rd Place Senior Essay
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At Peril of Their Own Lives

The first time that they came for him, he was in Paris. The foul fingers of the Nazi Empire let my grandfather slide through their gruesome clutches unscathed. Save for his parents, two Jewish newlyweds in occupied France, the rest of this family was not as lucky. While they rumbled in boxcars over French, German, and Polish tracks towards belching smokestacks where human ashes fell like snowflakes, he ran. He was six.

The last time that they came for him was in Arthès, a tiny village in rural, southern France. His childhood was a precarious, tightrope line between life and death. Would the outstretched fists of the Vichy regime, the Nazi puppet government, finally snatch him from his hiding place? He used to go swimming in the sunlit village river with the other French boys, framed by swiftly coursing waters, imposing stone viaducts, and the gnarled shadows of the Vichy regime. One of those French boys was his liaison to life: his family hid my grandfather behind a false staircase during those occasions when the Vichy officials raided the village for Jews. Both guardian and protégé knew the insurmountable price tag of this action. Had they be denounced, and they indeed endured blackmail and betrayal, they would have been executed on the spot. When asked why, they responded without missing a beat, “because it is the right thing to do.”

This past summer, I watched my grandfather put his hands up to the Yad Vashem plaque that he had erected, and braced himself upon it, likely burning his hands in the sweltering French heat, unvisited for nearly 70 years. He bowed his head as a silent monument of his gratitude to the people of Arthès who hid him, almost all of whom are now long gone. The words, etched in eternal metal above him, read, “one that saves one life has saved the entire world.”

Running long are the shifting hourglass shadows on the lives of survivors, liberators, and gentiles alike. The time has come for my generation to pick up the torch; the responsibility is ours alone to preserve the truth. The truth is sobering. It tells horrors unspoken of pain and struggle, splintered fingernails on the floors of Auschwitz, hate and shattered Berlin storefronts, and cramped closets where scared Jewish children crouch for hours untold. These stories from survivors often remind us of humanity's altruism: our ability to upstand for justice, our willingness to do the right thing, even in the inexorable darkness.

David Katz, a survivor with a story not unlike that of my grandfather, attributes as well his survival to "righteous non-Jews who did the right thing, risking their lives and the lives of their families to save Jewish lives." Both stories are haunting, but they share the heroism and immortal courage of the righteous few who actively chose to uphold virtue and ethics during a time of blind moral collapse. While apathy, collaboration, and outright hostility raged rampantly, these outliers demonstrated extraordinary compassion for their fellow man.

I remember the moment when I witnessed the most poignant reality of these stories. Back in sun-flowered France this summer, my grandfather was reunited with his long-lost childhood friend and protector. They embraced and the friend, now well into his 90s, showed my family the same stairs that my grandfather had sprinted up, time and time again, all those years ago. The attic was a cramped room filled with dusty sunbeams, mirage-like and surreal. Around a corner, the wall fell away to reveal a tiny, mildewed niche barely big enough to fit the two children and two parents, who once huddled in the darkness there for unimaginable eternities, while Nazi troops searched the village for them. Looking at the false wall with my grandfather standing silent by my side was like surfacing from cold water. I owe my life to these righteous citizens.

My grandfather's memorial plaque under the French sun exalts the citizens who risked everything, "au peril de leur vies," at the peril of their lives, to save the desolate and downtrodden from

certain death. These Righteous Among the Nations, as they are called, offered the ultimate sacrifice. Stories like these light a candle of hope, guide a path out of the depths. They expose the infernal crimson stains of history, but they illuminate the honor of humanity. To allow these stories to gutter into a wisp of ephemerality is to indict the deaths of the six million and the righteous strivings of the few to have been in vain. To speak the name of the dead is to make them live again.

Fittingly, David Katz urges, "it is important that we speak out when there is hatred in the world, and prevent it from happening again." I empathetically charge my generations and myself with this responsibility. As Holocaust witnesses dwindle, it is our duty to oil the lamp of learning, to preserve, to persevere, and most of all, to educate, *l'dor v'dor*, from generation to generation, the past that we refuse to forget. We need to continue to mandate unbiased education and foster healthy dialogue.

Ultimately, we must apply the lessons that the past has taught us. As witnesses and as human beings, we must celebrate diversity and coexistence, tolerance, and activism. Justice we must pursue as we reflect and remember history's mistakes; otherwise, they become mistakes indefatigably repeated. We shall not stand idly by the blood of our neighbors as bigotry and hatred again begin to seep out of the bowels of history. From fiery masks in Charlottesville to sharpened words in Washington to hands wrapped around barbed-wire fences in El Paso, it is apparent that the same tide of intolerance that tapped into resentment and insecurity and surged through 1930s Germany may be rising again. This time, we shall surely rebuke.