

Honorable Mention Senior Essay
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Holocaust and History

Maya Angelou once said, "History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again." In essence, this quote says that history should not be forgotten because remembering it is painful. Rather, it must be evoked, and often, if there is any hope to learn from it. The Holocaust is considered humanity's darkest passage as the Nazis and their collaborators exercised unimaginable cruelty during World War II on those that they considered sub-human, Jews in massive numbers, but also political prisoners, the physically and mentally disabled, Roman and Sinti, Jehovah's Witnesses, and homosexuals. This calamity led to the destruction of over 6 million Jews and others identified as "life unworthy of life" who were starved, tortured, shot, or gassed in horrifying and humiliating ways. Only survivors and witnesses truly understand the depths of perpetrator evil, and it is thus their voices who have so much to teach subsequent generations. We must listen to them if we are to learn the lessons history has to teach.

Remembering the Holocaust is vital, a tragedy such as this must not be overlooked. The testimonies of victims and witnesses are important for they offer firsthand knowledge of events that later generations might otherwise find unbelievable. For Jews deprived of citizenships and ways to make a living before the war and the deported to ghettos during the war, day-to-day existence was a constant struggle. Once sent to killing fields or concentration/death camps, the sheer terror of what they faced might have been of short or longer duration, but it reflected the depths of human depravity fueled by anti-Semitism on the part of perpetrators. Bill Jucksch was an American liberator in his teens when he entered Gunskirchen Lager camp in Austria in 1945; but even as an elderly man, he became emotional to explain what he saw in the barracks. He remembered the bodies stacked on top of each other, most

dead, others unable to move all engulfed in a mass of filth that he found indescribable. Jucksch was an eyewitness to atrocity who shared his story for as long as he lived. The sight of Gunskirchen Lager made vividly real to him what he was fighting against, a lesson he never forgot, a traumatizing experience that caused him to want to share his story as his way to fight fascism long after the fall of the Third Reich.

Jucksch subsequently died in 2017, and like his generation, Holocaust survivors are also dying and are thus few in number today. Their passing does not diminish the importance of their stories, though. For, as long as the accounts are known, the memory of those dark times is not gone and can provide critical lessons. Testimonies show the world the truths of the Holocaust, the trials of it, and what really happened to the victims. Jews in Axis-occupied countries in the 1940s were not afforded the time to rest, lest they be captured by the Nazis, as explained by Hanns Loewenbach, a German Jew who was fortunate enough to escape to Italy and then Shanghai during the Holocaust. However, he had to run for years. He could not rest unless it was in alleyways or cars. He could not stop running because he was running for his life. He only managed to escape with the acquisition of a passport from an old friend who had joined the German army. In Loewenbach's words, "we have to speak about it in order that people will not forget those people who could not speak." Loewenbach reflects on the 6 million Jews who were not able to escape and subsequently lost their lives. They knew a terrible reality that we do not know, but Holocaust survivors come close to understanding those experiences. Loewenbach tried to give voice to them. He died in 2012, but his efforts to tell his own story and reflect on the stories of victims who did not survive reveals how vital it is to maintain the honor of all those who decided to acknowledge their existence, the anti-Semitism, and the brutality that led to their deaths during World War II.

Eyewitness sources, like those of Jucksch and Loewenbach, provide compelling evidence of the Holocaust. They are vital primary sources that we can learn from. They can be used in classrooms to teach historical reality as they bear witness to what happened. Testimony also provides insight into understanding other genocidal behaviors. It can act as a warning by providing cautionary lessons about

how and why civilizations descend into barbarity, and it refutes deniers. Maintaining memory of the Holocaust can be aided by its incorporation into school curriculums on many levels so that students can early on learn from the wretched time. It is important that the Holocaust maintains relevance now in the wake of the apparent growth of xenophobic and anti-Semitic sentiments in recent years. In the words of John McCain, "we should never hide from history." That is especially true in the case of the Holocaust, now more than ever due to the passing of survivors and the rise of global extremism. The Holocaust must not be forgotten but learned from so that societies can better understand the extremes of human behavior. Father Patrick Desbois, a Holocaust teacher, argues, "Believing in the human race is a serious responsibility" (Holocaust by Bullets, p. 68). This statement means that we must constantly grapple with right and wrong, because wrong comes too easily. It is eyewitness testimony from the Holocaust that helps us to understand our responsibility never to be indifferent to human existence.