

3<sup>rd</sup> Place (tied) Junior Essay  
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### **My Family's Legacy**

Throughout our history, nothing can compare to how devastating the Holocaust has been. I can't imagine how hard it must have been to go through the long process of trying to save your life just because you practiced a different religion from someone else. Some people may say to try and forget, but those who witnessed, read, or heard about this massacre can never forget. We can only honor those whose souls are still in our memory, to try to never forget and make sure that this time in history never again repeats itself. Those who survived will never overcome the awful and dreadful experiences they endured under the forceful, commanding, indomitable Adolf Hitler.

Some survivors are only alive to tell their stories thanks to those who risked their own lives, by offering their homes as a safe place for Jewish families, knowing that they were risking their own lives in the process. My family may not be Jewish, but all my grandparents were born in Europe and lived there during World War II, before coming to Canada and the United States. My paternal grandparents were in Czechoslovakia. My maternal grandfather grew up in the Netherlands, and my maternal grandmother grew up in Romania. They were all forced to endure the cruel and inhumane treatment of the Nazis during World War II.

My Dutch grandfather (my Opa) was only seven years old when the war ended. But during the war, when he was just a little boy, he and his family lived in an apartment in Amsterdam. They had only scraps to eat, like soup made from potato peels, or anything that could help them not face the wrath of hunger. They were forced to spend most of the time taking shelter in their apartment. They could hear the air raids of the bomber planes,

worried that they would have their lives taken from them. Life was terrifying, impenetrable, and full of hunger.

But they were alive and they were together, that's all that mattered. It was a terrible time for everyone, but it was even worse for anyone who was Jewish, as Jews could be taken away and were often killed. My great-grandparents, who were not Jewish, risked their lives and those of their whole family, and hid a Jewish family in a room in the apartment. It was a big secret from my Opa, since he was only seven. He was too young to understand the importance of such a secret. He was not told until many years later, but he had vague memories of looking under the closed door of that room and seeing the shoes of people moving around. Most of this story was lost with my great-grandparents. But we do know that for helping out this Jewish family in need, they were given the honor of a "remembrance tree" planted in Israel, with their family name on it: Selles. The tree, along with many others, is located in the Garden of the Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem. The trees in this garden honor the many families who risked their lives to save others. To this day, even now, Yad Vashem is still recognizing families who were there for people who needed them. Some are still not recognized, and are known as anonymous. They may not know about the trees honoring them, but are surely remembered and honored for their actions and good deeds.

If I were to be put in the place that my great-grandparents were put in, I believe I would follow what they did to help someone, even if it meant risking my own life. I can't imagine the fear they felt, hiding a family, keeping this secret, making sure that they survived, and their children. I couldn't forgive myself if I were to say no to someone in need. To live with having put someone in more danger, or to allow them to be caught and sent away to a concentration camp, would create lifelong guilt and regret. I would rather risk my own life to help save another.

Hearing my family's story motivates me to do something that is good in the world, like protesting for climate change action, going to a homeless shelter, volunteering at an animal shelter, or even going to a country to help less fortunate children that don't have a good childhood due to the effects of war and poverty. There are so many ways to help out in our community or in the world. It makes me realize how important life is, how I can just have that ability to help make someone's life better. Being so lucky to live in this country gives us endless possibilities on how we can positively impact what's around us, and help others do the same. Many don't know the feeling of being free to speak their minds, to say anything, like the Pakistani activist, Malala Yousafzai who fought for women to get an education, because her country would not allow her to get one because of her gender. Another great example of an activist is Greta Thunberg. She is climate change activist who seeks to tell the world about the damage that we have done to our planet, our home. She helps by letting us know what we need to do in order to restore the environment to what it once was. Both of these women activists' stories made the world open their eyes as to what goes on in many countries, and they were a major wake up call to the lack of equality and appreciation around the world. Now, I feel like we all could help make positive change in the world, one step at a time.