

Honorable Mention (tied) Junior Essay  
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## **Upstanders**

Imagine enjoying a peaceful walk and a sunset with your family on a beautiful fall day, and the freedom of taking in that simple pleasure, undisturbed and uninterrupted. Now consider that same innocent walk, but instead of being filled with awe of nature, your gaze is distracted by suspicious glares of others walking on the same path and the sound of racist language muttered not so quietly from their lips. Gradually the walk that you typically look forward to becomes a dreaded activity because the bullying and hatred from the world worsens. Imagine one day you walk home and learn that your home was raided, and you see Nazi soldiers standing in front of the house to arrest you along with other members of your family. Your family is forcibly dragged into a truck filled with other people that you recognize as your neighbors. You try to fight back, to challenge the actions of these unwelcome guests, to seek an explanation for their violent and unwarranted behavior. You ask one of the soldiers why he is doing this and he says simply, "because you are Jewish." You catch a glimpse of the glare of hatred in his eyes, the look of fear in the eyes of your family, and you realize that you may never return to your home or be filled with the joy of a peaceful sunset again. You wonder, how could this happen, how no one attempts to rebel against this evil agenda. You close your eyes, unable to withstand the horror of the moment, and begin to slowly contemplate the possibility of your own eventual death.

This was the tragic experience for up to eleven million victims during the time of the Holocaust. Six million of these people were innocent Jews, but there were other victims: Africans, Roma, homosexuals, the disabled, and many other groups were also

imprisoned, experimented on, and murdered. It was a massive genocide hidden within the boundaries of concentration camps and death camps. The mistreatment of Jewish people did not start with the Nazis. It had been a longstanding tradition for centuries in Europe to target Jews. But in Germany, Hitler's regime pursued their demise as part of his bloodthirsty quest for building a master race. They used propaganda and falsely accused Jews of spreading the Black Death or causing a bad economic situation in Germany, to persuade the public that Jews were to blame for all of their and the world's problems. This is an example of antisemitism on an extreme level. Antisemitism is the hatred of Jews either as a group or a concept.

Yet the main reason why the atrocities of the Holocaust occurred is that not enough people had the courage to take the initiative to be different and become upstanders. A bystander is someone who disagrees with an issue but stays silent and doesn't speak up to try to make a difference in the situation. People who disagreed with the Nazis stayed silent in fear of experiencing the same fate as the Jews. An Upstander, however, becomes a leader and stands up to make positive change in their community, their country, or the world – even if it means risking their own life. Fortunately, not everyone was a bystander or an anti-Semite during the Holocaust. In France there was a large Resistance force against the Nazis. They put their lives on the line and spied on the Nazis, destroyed Nazi trains and weapons depots, and hid Jews inside their own houses. If my neighbors were part of the French Resistance and were hiding Jews, I think that my course of action would be to aid them in their efforts of hiding the Jews, even though it could very well mean the end of my life. After all, becoming an upstander means accepting the risk and dangers associated with it. Life is about making a positive difference in the world, and just by becoming an upstander and hiding a few Jews inside my home, I could make a positive difference in the world.

Elie Wiesel, born on September 29, 1928 in present day Romania was a Jewish Human Rights Activist and survivor of the Auschwitz concentration camp. He dedicated his life to being an upstander. He vividly remembered his deportation at age 15. "It all happened so fast. The Ghetto. The deportation. The sealed cattle car. The fiery altar upon which the history of our people and the future of mankind were sacrificed." After surviving the Holocaust, Wiesel stated, "I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence always encourages the tormentor, never the tormented." George Santayana, a Spanish philosopher and poet stated, "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it." This is especially true in the case of the Holocaust.

According to a survey conducted by the Anti-Defamation League, an anti-hate organization, two out of every three people surveyed had never heard of the Holocaust or didn't believe the historical accounts to be accurate. The survey also revealed that almost 50% of people under the age of thirty-five had never heard of the Holocaust. This is an unacceptable lack of knowledge. As the population of Holocaust survivors dwindles, it is up to our generation to keep the stories of the survivors alive, so that events like the Holocaust don't happen again. Remembering is part of being an upstander. We must study and learn about the past to make the future better. Our world throughout its history has experienced enough slaughter of mankind, yet antisemitism and hate towards other ethnic groups still occurs and is spread through the internet and social media. If we don't actively stand up for our rights and the rights of others, we are doomed to repeat parts of our horrible past.

In order not to repeat our past, we must realize that time is not linear. It is a loophole that only changes when we do. This is why we must stand up for each other and work

together if we want to make any progress as one human race. I encourage you to stand up for your rights and to support beliefs that make the world loving and peaceful. Learning about the stories of Jewish survivors of the Holocaust and upstanders motivates me to choose what is right, to value the life and freedom of others, and to adhere to my own moral compass rather than what the world tempts me to believe. Many people find it challenging to ignore what the world wants them to do. For some, it is too hard, scary, or even unthinkable to be different and have their own individual opinion. They would sooner join the horrible ways of the world and spread hate than not be part of the majority. I, however, have made a different choice for my life. I choose to lead and not to follow, to be an upstander, knowing that although it can be risky, there is no other way to truly live, show love for others, and break the loophole of hate and indifference.