

Honorable Mention, Senior Essay
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Witness: The Ethics Generated by the Stories Left Behind

The personal experiences that are passed down to us through the survivors of the Holocaust are the only things separating it from being just another event in history. The Holocaust is one of the most tragic events in recent history, if not all of history. By listening to personal experiences shared from it, we become witnesses to it, allowing us to prevent it from being repeated ever again. Tragedies like this should be a reminder to us about what we do every day, how it affects the people around us, and the ethics we use when making decisions.

Hatred during the Holocaust became normal, so much that schoolchildren were taught to isolate and harass their Jewish classmates. A survivor named Dora Weissman told her story of how, even though the vast majority went along with what was safe for them, knowing that others were being hurt because of it, a small group of people did what their ethical compass told them was right, and ended up helping many people to survive. I would hope that in a situation similar to this, I would be able to push against this wave of hatred and follow my own ethics to do what would help people, despite putting myself in danger. These heartbreaking stories are a motivator to me, and to everyone, that when someone is being oppressed we cannot just stand by. Every human being is equal in value, no matter race, religion, or any other difference.

Faced with the situation millions that Europeans had, to debate within themselves of whether or not to help the oppressed Jews, is an easy question to answer and an extremely difficult one to follow through on. Everyone should believe that torturing and

killing six million people is clearly the wrong choice, but when faced with repercussions of the same fate for you and your family if you were to intervene, taking action becomes much more menacing. I believe that the people who helped regardless demonstrated overwhelming courage, as they knew the risks, were terrified of the consequences, and did what was right anyway. I would like to say that I could do this, and at heart, I would want to do this, but I know I am not as brave as they were. I would support the Jews in any way that I could, whether that be staying quiet or lending food, but I personally would not have the strength to do what thousands of people who helped did. By helping and not just staying quiet, they put themselves and their families in danger, while also saving thousands. This is a demonstration of courage at its finest.

The stories shared by survivors are paradigm altering. If you put yourself in their position and truly dive into what it was like for them, there is no way to come out unchanged. They show us the worst of humanity, but also the best. We see what we can actually accomplish when faced with an event as horrifying as the Holocaust. Personally, my worldview and ethics were altered after just one of the stories, and there are millions. These stories are a compass to how we should act, respecting our fellow human beings. By becoming witnesses to the Holocaust we are vowing to never let it happen again.

Dora Weissman's story, no matter how heartbreaking, is not unique. Each and every survivor, whether that be a Jew, African, LGBTQ, gypsy, or anyone else subject to the rule of Nazi Germany, has a tale. Even those not persecuted by the Nazis still have stories of what it was like to see people rounded up like animals and carted away by the thousands. These stories are a scar on mankind, but they are a scar that should not be hidden. They connect us and move us to stop it from happening again. Everyone who hears them is alerted in some way, and that helps us formulate and follow our own ethics. They bring us together, rather than tearing us apart, like they were meant to.