

Second Place Senior Essay  
Lauren Aaby  
Cape Henry Collegiate School, Mr. Brian Facemire

## **An Impossible Question**

It is often hard to hear the stories of survivors and victims. It is hard to listen to these horrifying atrocities that were committed, and it is even harder to think about what you might have done if you had lived during that time. Whether you might have been a victim or bystander, or even a culprit of the crime, what would you do? Learning about the Holocaust brings up these difficult questions, almost impossible to answer in our modern times. However, learning about people who did live through these difficult times helps one imagine their world and experiences, and it makes the dilemma clearer. Using these stories, it is easier to think about formulating your own morals and ethics that would help guide you to an answer for this impossible question. Only after finding your true values that would help you determine your actions and choices would you be able to start asking yourself what you would do if you found a Jewish family hiding out during the Holocaust. Would you turn them in, would you keep quiet, or would you help them get to safety, even if you were risking your family as well? Through learning about the past experiences of people who lived through horrible times such as the Holocaust and learning about our personal ethics, we can try to predict our actions to know what we might have done in such an awful situation.

Many people living during the Holocaust did have a choice to make similar to this, and not all of them chose the same thing. One woman named Erika, who contributed to the Holocaust Memorial Museum, recounted how in one of her desperate hours of need, a stranger had the courage to help hide her from the police, without regard for her own safety. The stranger, who covered for Erika, pretended she was her daughter in front of the police, even though Erika was really from the Jewish Ghetto. This woman teaches others how someone following a personal ethical compass, without regard to personal

gain, helps save others. It shows people how they could act, even in the face of danger, and follow their ethics. One survivor even recounted how he found kindness to be a defining ethic even for some members of the SS, a Nazi executive force. He wrote about how he found it, “noteworthy that, even in the devil’s den, there were two apparently decent men, Lt. Hardenberg, and the short, stocky, ruddy guard” that didn’t treat him as inferior like others had done. These two “everyday heroes” as the survivor called them, chose to act by their own defining set of ethics, not the ones that the Nazi regime had forced onto them. Ultimately, these two examples, and more, reveal to people how they could act based on their similar values and ethics.

Sometimes though, defining your personal ethical compass can be just as difficult as predicting how you might have acted during these times. These personal ethics impact your choices, your actions, and your decisions, even your life as a whole. To clarify, ethics are a set of guidelines and moral principles that one forms in order to have a basis for many decisions in their lifetimes. One of the most important things to consider when creating your own is your past experiences. They shape the way you think and they shape your character, eventually helping one discover how important different ethics are to them. Sometimes though, even learning about others’ experiences can make an impact on your views, and show you how meaningful certain ethics can be for you. Personally, even just learning about these victims’ stories and others had a significant impact on my views on compassion, respect for others, and concern for others. Stories like those of Holocaust survivors teach people more about themselves and their values; they inspired me to really think about my own. Now I am able to see how every one of these incredibly important morals shapes my decisions and opinions, helping me to discover my own ethical compass.

Altogether, leaning about victims of the Holocaust and formulating a personal ethical compass starts one on the pathway to answering the near-impossible question: What would you do if you found a Jewish family during the Holocaust? Most people nowadays

would love to answer that they would help them escape the Nazi regime, but I don't believe that everyone would actually help. By possibly doing that, they would risk their safety, and the safety of their family. After all, most people's ethical compasses lead them to protect things they love, including their families. Personally I believe that I would not say anything about the Jewish family. I could never risk the lives of my loved ones, nor could I purposefully lead an innocent family to a gas chamber. I do think this would ring true to the majority of people now if they had lived during the Holocaust. All in all, a person's ethical compass is the ultimate reasoning that guides one through such difficult decisions as this one, and though it is different for everyone, most people share common values that lead them to think similarly in these types of situation.

In the end, however, one could never truly predict their actions during a time like that. It is such a stressful, dangerous, unsafe and unstable situation, with so many factors that affect decisions. It is hard now to make a decision like which classes you are going to take next year, how could you truly predict your actions to this extent? One really cannot. We just rely on our values that we have created and changed based on personal and common experiences to help guide our daily lives. Ultimately, everyone believes in something, and this makes us unique: the ability to make our own choices and decisions, and base our character on things that are important to us.