

When one thinks of the Holocaust, or of the lives of those who lived in such a time, we immediately think of murder and the deaths of those forced to participate in such a devastating time. This misunderstanding has spread for nearly eighty years, but I make it my largest obligation to remind you of what lies beneath. On January 27th, my school went to a museum dedicated to the remembrance of the Holocaust. To many, history such as this lies solely beneath the pages of textbooks and timelines, but to me it was more. I used to think this way too, so I won't hesitate to say I know where the minds of my fellow students rest. Unlike the others, the Holocaust is an experience that speaks to me like no other. We went to the museum to learn, and even when I thought I had acquired all I wanted to know, a new name was introduced, one I had never heard of before.

I found her name in a column of thousands, typed in dark black ink that looked as if it never aged. Rosa Marie Burger. Hundreds of thoughts rushed through me, like ash carried on a wind I could not see. A weight settled in my chest. I looked around, thousands of names resting engraved in the same ink, none of which I had recognized. So what was so different about her?

I looked at her name once again, her birth and death date typed beneath. Underneath her name sat a radio, its wooden frame polished but cracked at the corners. Its dial was small, and I could hear her fingers turning it delicately, so quiet that the sound was little to nothing. I look down at my fingers, soft, the grooves evidently dry. I wanted to see her life, experience her life. Today, teenagers and young adults live within

the walls of their jobs, consumed by modern technology and social media. She was the same age, living where the main form of information came from radios. Living in a time where radios could lead to the death of anyone who shared information from foreign countries amongst one another. The price was high in her day, and yet I could see her bringing that radio to her home, surprising her mom with the luxury of intercepting communication. Every piece of me was fascinated by her story, and all that she endured.

After a moment, I re-entered reality. All I wanted to do was learn about this woman, and all that she lived through. I wanted to know her story, and be able to imagine it. But I couldn't just stand there while the rest explored the museum without me, so I walked along a new hallway, a new area.

The next section of the museum was a collection of shoes, all collected from the grounds of the Holocaust after it had officially ended. They were old and darkened, their fabrics damaged immensely. There were thousands of them just in the children's section, even more in the adults. It was dreadful to see, to know that each and every one of those shoes were taken without consent, because there was nobody to get consent from. They were so old fashioned, each shoe of a different style. Some had lost color completely, all of them being woven differently, making the shoes of today seem far too complex than what is necessary to survive. Though this benefits us, it is always fascinating to see how we have all evolved. Their shoes were so thin, thin enough that stepping on a rock would feel just the same as walking barefoot.

I walked the long hallway, full from beginning to end with shoes on each side, concealed by the glass that reflected my image perfectly. I examined every shoe I could, some speaking to me more than others. I could imagine the children and their happiness before such a devastating event, before all the bombing and violence amongst them all. I could see the girls running around in their dresses, their hair in ponytails, and the boys in their little trousers and knee socks jumping around. I imagined their feet, their shoes that were now on display for those trying to understand their lives.

Then, I imagined Rosa. I could see her shoes as she walked to the houses of her neighbors and friends, checking up on them as often as she could. I couldn't explain why, but she felt so warm, so comforting. In my mind, I saw her wearing loose red shoes that folded over the tops of her feet and tied gracefully together with brown laces. She moved through the grass, her feet feeling light as air as she walked amongst her small town, the sky beautifully sunny. I could feel her overwhelming presence, her comforting spirit in every scenario I could picture, but within seconds the wave of dread washed over me. I was brought down, down so deep my stomach began to turn, to twist into knots so tight I could barely breathe. How our lives seem effortless beside hers. It was foolish to think that she was anything other than a hero, to think that she lived a normal life filled solely with joy and happiness all the time. She saw it all, she fought to save those in ways that had nothing to do with keeping someone's heart in check. I looked once more at the shoes behind the perfectly clear glass, to see such relics was heart

breaking. I wondered if Rosa's shoes were in there, deep within the depth of all that laid within the piles. I took my focus off the shoes and onto myself, my reflection. My heart still pounding, my stomach still in knots, I could imagine her, deep within the glass, and within my mind. I could not help but feel sorry, to feel such empathy for all that she went through. Joy had no place in such a room.

The longer I stood there, the more the glass seemed to dissolve. It was no longer a barrier between past and present, but a thin veil separating our lives from theirs. I tried to imagine the courage it took not only to survive, but to remain human while doing so. History tends to measure heroism in extravagant ways, in loud declarations of defiance. Yet, Rosa's heroism was quieter. It lived in the decision to wake up every morning when despair and mourning would have been easier. It existed in the preservation of her heart when the world around her seemed determined to harden it. She did not wield a weapon or command an army, she carried something far heavier than the talent of combat: hope. To wield hope in a world so determined to extinguish it, is rebellion. That is what inspired me. This museum, and the world as we know it, saw her as a survivor, but survival alone should not define her story. Many endured, but not all were able to remain compassionate. That is where her heroism rests. To remain gentle in a time of cruelty is an act of defiance greater than any shouted protest.

As I stared at the shoes, I understood something that unsettled me. I had always imagined heroes as distant figures - monumental, almost untouchable. But Rosa was once a girl. She walked through towns. She checked on neighbors. She laughed

beneath the bright, brilliant skies. She was ordinary before history demanded the extraordinary of her.

If she was once ordinary, then heroism is not reserved for the extraordinary alone. It is born in moments of choice.

At that moment, I reflected on my own life once again. I remembered the inconveniences that had once been mistaken as hardships, the days I had allowed frustration to power over my gratitude. When I compared this to the trials of Rosa, all that she endured, my struggles seemed small, almost indulgent. Yet standing there, I did not feel shame as much as responsibility. Rosa's life demanded something of me: remembrance, empathy, and the refusal of indifference.

Her story compelled me to look at the world differently, to notice the isolated, to defend the vulnerable, to speak when silence feels easier. I was reminded of her courage, and the idea that courage is not always loud. Sometimes, courage lies in the quiet consistency of kindness when cruelty would be simpler.

Although the museum was silent, I felt as though she had spoken. Not through words, but through absence. Through shoes without feet. Through a name carved in stillness.

When I finally stepped back, I was no longer overwhelmed with sadness and dread. I felt like I was given an invitation. The girl in the glass was not Rosa, nor was it a girl who could ever fully understand the magnitude of what Rosa endured, but she could choose what to do with the spiritual inheritance of that story. I may not have been able to rewrite her suffering, or lesson what was taken, but I can live in a way that honors it.

Rosa Marie Burger was a hero, not because history remembers her, but because she refused to let history strip her of humanity. If I carry even a fraction of that resilience into my own life - if I meet injustice with courage, and meet despair with stubborn hope - then her legacy continues, and the story ahead is mine to walk.

Bibliography

<https://www.ushmm.org/remember/holocaust-reflections-testimonies/behind-every-name-a-story/rosa-marie-burger>