

## SCHWAB HOLOCAUST ESSAY CONTEST AWARD WINNING SUBMISSION

At the community-wide Yom Hashoah commemoration held several weeks ago, Schwab Holocaust Essay winner, Erica Wang, an 11th grade student at Hershey High School, read her prize-winning essay as part of the observance. The topic was: "What can be learned about preventing genocide and mass atrocities through study of the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes?" Erica's essay was outstanding and we are pleased to share it so that all may read it.

The Holocaust was an atrocity. It was and still is one of the most poignant and painful reminders of the scope of human cruelty. No words will ever be able to truly convey its profundity and pain, but we continue to study the Holocaust the Shoah for although it was a crime of unparalleled proportion, it imparts universal lessons.

The first lesson is of memory. In the words of Nobel Peace Laureate Elie Wiesel, "Anyone who does not remember [the dead] betrays them again". In this sense, it is our duty to remember and understand the Shoah, as well as other Nazi crimes. As we read and learn and remember the six million Jewry of the Shoah, we realize that every victim dehumanized and brutalized, used as justification for genocide because of something beyond their control is more than just a statistic. Each person had a name despite Nazi efforts to erase them with numbers branded on skin each person had a family; each person had a dream; each person had a love, a truth, a life. Through our remembrance of the Shoah, we learn that every person birthed and every life lost is more than just a number, for in each person lies a universe of their own. And so, we learn to treasure life as the extraordinary gift it is.

The second lesson is of peace. Elie Wiesel wrote, "Peace is not God's gift to his creatures; peace is our gift to each other." In the nearly 3,400 years of recorded human history, humans have been at peace for only 268 of them. During the other 3,132 or 92% humans have warred and fought and killed since war is an age old manifestation of human nature and human conflict. In this way, peace is neither natural nor inevitable; instead, it must be appreciated, nurtured, and protected, or else will dissolve into chaos. The Shoah has taught us that it is our responsibility to hoard and shelter peace from the uncaring discord of the world, for if we do not if peace changes to war, as it so capriciously can then love crumples to hate, and happiness dissolves to fear, and life fades to death.

The third lesson is of state sanctioned discrimination. Perhaps counterintuitively, the Shoah did not begin with deportation, nor did it begin with forced labor, nor incarceration, nor systematic persecution. Instead, it began with inhumane dogmas that were preached and revered by too many, loathing and perceived inferiority of all things other. But bitter xenophobia and antisemitism were not contained to Germany alone. On May 13, 1939, the German transatlantic liner *St. Louis* sailed from Hamburg, Germany, for Havana, Cuba. On the voyage were 937 passengers, almost all Jewry fleeing from the Third Reich. When the *St. Louis* arrived in Havana harbor on May 27, the Cuban government admitted only 28 passengers. The remaining 908 were forced to turn around, not even allowed to step foot on shore. When the *St. Louis* sailed past Florida so close that passengers could see the lights of Miami some passengers cabled President Franklin D. Roosevelt, asking for refuge. Roosevelt never responded. Instead, a State Department official sent a telegram stating that the passengers must "await their turns on the

waiting list and qualify for and obtain immigration visas before they may be admissible into the United States”, but due to the annual immigration quota, the waiting list was at least several years long. On June 6, 1939, the Jewish refugees aboard the *St. Louis* abandoned hope of docking in the United States or Cuba and sailed back to Europe, where hundreds of passengers given refuge in Belgium, France, and the Netherlands eventually fell victim to the Nazi’s “final solution”. Thus, from the Shoah, we learn the dangers of governments that persecute others under the guise of protecting its people, as well as the responsibility that other nations bear to prevent this oppression.

The fourth lesson is of individual responsibility. The Shoah succeeded due to not only the “bureaucratization of genocide”, in the words of Robert Lifton, but also the betrayals and failures of the common people. Auschwitz was designed by architects, not public officials. Court cases were dismissed and laws upheld by countless judges and lawyers. In this way, the crimes of Nazis are also the crimes of the Nuremberg aristocracy and elites. Just as guilty, however, was the American public. Public opinion of the time was ostensibly sympathetic to the plight of the *St. Louis* refugees and critical of Hitler's policies, but Americans continued to favor immigration restrictions, including the quotas that prevented the *St. Louis* from docking in Miami and ultimately led to the deaths of hundreds of Jewry. Unfortunately, as Jean Baptiste Alphonse Karr said, “Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose”: the more things change, the more they stay the same. This past November, *Washington Post* and ABC News ran a poll that found that 54% of respondents opposed admitting Syrian exiles into the United States. In July 1938, *Fortune Magazine* ran a poll that found that over two thirds of respondents opposed admitting German, Austrian, and other political refugees roughly 70% of whom were Jewish into the United States. Much of the language commonly invoked in opposition to admitting Syrian refugees today bears striking resemblance to arguments against providing safe harbor to Jewish refugees in the late 1930s. Today, many oppose refugees from Syria due to safety concerns. In 1945, Americans saw Jewry as the “most menacing group” in America, ahead of both Japanese and Germans. Jewry were also associated with Communism and thus seen as deeply “un-American”. In response to the irrational fear and incoherent antisemitism gripping the nation, on November 29, 1939, Eleanor Roosevelt said, “We must not let ourselves be moved by fear in this country.” We must not succumb to panic and suspicion. Instead, in the words of Elie Wiesel, “There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice, but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.” And so it is the responsibility of everyone, not only civil servants, to speak for the mute and empower the powerless, regardless of race, age, religion, or social standing. This lesson of the Shoah to assume individual responsibility of countering persecution and injustice endures even unto today.

The fifth lesson is of silence. As Elie Wiesel said, “We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented.” The genocide of 20<sup>th</sup> century European Jewry succeeded through the gospel of hatred from few and, just as importantly, the damning silence from others. True, they were scared but in the face of wrong, they should have been brave. True, they were unsure but when confronted with evil, they should have been certain. The Nazis are guilty, but so were the others that did little more than stand idly by and watch indifferently as depravity and harm unfolded before them. Too often, people choose neutrality as a means of not taking a side, but in a war of moral and virtue against destruction and hate, impartiality is impossible. Through the Shoah, we learn that indifference

and apathy are not synonymous with neutrality; instead, they are merely a coward's way of taking the side of the oppressor, not the oppressed.

The sixth lesson is of education. The Shoah cannot be contained to pages in a textbook or dates on a timeline; it is messy, and cruel, and brutal, and unforgiving. Though it is difficult to teach and painful to learn, we must continue to do our best to implement the Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, which concluded: "We share a commitment to encourage the study of the Holocaust in all its dimensions... a commitment to commemorate the victims of the Holocaust and to honor those who stood against it... a commitment to throw light on the still obscured shadows of the Holocaust... a commitment to plant the seeds of a better future amidst the soil of a bitter past... a commitment... to remember the victims who perished, respect the survivors still with us, and reaffirm humanity's common aspiration for mutual understanding and justice." Through the Shoah, we learn and accept the responsibility that we bear to teach our children all of our history, even the parts that many would rather forget, because those parts allow us to draft a brighter future by defining our mistakes of the past.

Ultimately, the Shoah, though unrivalled in scope and severity, offers warning and guidance to all. It speaks of memory, and peace, and state sanctioned discrimination, and individual responsibility, and silence, and perhaps most importantly, education. There are times when we are given a choice between what is right and what is easy. May this Yom Hashoah be a reminder to all to choose what is right to choose to speak when confronted with wrong and, no matter the circumstance, act in the face of evil.