

HOLOCAUST & HUMAN RIGHTS
ART & WRITING CONTEST 2022
HIGH SCHOOL ESSAY
FIRST PLACE
IAN CRESSMAN

Some nights, I go camping.

From my seat on an aged log, rings worn and bark from an age past, I gaze at the stars, bright points of light twinkling in patchworks of navy blue, sewn together into the quilt of the night sky. When my neck grows tired and the crackle of the campfire beckons, I stare at the mesmerizing flames, waving back and forth in the gentle breeze. The fire warms my soul.

But that flame, those stars, had drastically different meanings on the grounds of Germany's concentration camps. The stars meant a cold night, huddling together as wind chilled the bones, shivering and shaking as life drained from nearby faces. The flames produced black smoke that smelled of flesh, tasted of death.

How could these two worlds share the same Earth?

Acceptance is impossible, but belief is necessary.

As the number of Holocaust survivors continues to dwindle, first-hand experiences alone will inevitably fail to keep the Holocaust remembered. However, as survivor Elie Wiesel once stated, "listening to a witness makes you a witness." Those who witness the stories and their trauma, their shock and their pain, wield power as well. Especially as society continues leaping towards the future, witnesses must ground us to our past, help us to remember the suffering and horror caused by carelessness and the unwillingness for confrontation. Witnesses are crucial to keep the Holocaust alive in the archives of humanity's memory.

The good news? Witnesses are everywhere. From the very creation of Holocaust Remembrance Day, witnesses have been birthed. From the documentaries, the interviews, the stories passed between generations, witnesses have sprouted. And from the ashes of genocide, witnesses have begun to breathe life.

Now, it rests upon us to facilitate their growth, provide opportunities for learning, continue the legacies of Holocaust survivors. As one grasps a lamp in a dark corridor, we must hold them

tight, lest they slip between our fingers and crash to the ground, their light dissipating into the night sky.

Back to the stars.

The stars that bless our vision and cascade our world in soft, silvery light. The stars that prick our eyes as the wind draws their moisture, cold light reflecting a cold heart.

History and the present are inextricably linked, but to retain the purest, most important messages, they cannot be examined simply through a scholar's lens. Rather, survivors and witnesses must lend us their telescopes, so decades past can be understood. And if it hurts to look, if the light tears at our eyes, we must stare anyway. No matter where our gaze falls, the stars continue to shine, and the fire continues to burn. As witnesses, it's our duty, our burden, to stoke it. To control it.

The Holocaust ended nearly 70 years ago, but its reverberations are still being felt around the world. They *need* to be felt. For the first step in the perpetuation and expansion of current world atrocities is the denial of those residing in our footprints.

HOLOCAUST & HUMAN RIGHTS
ART & WRITING CONTEST 2022
HIGH SCHOOL ESSAY
SECOND PLACE
ALYSSA MATHISSON

We Say Never Again; Do We Mean It?

When I sat down to write this essay, I didn't know where to begin. There were no words that I could find that could accurately convey the atrocities of the Holocaust. Rather than making a desperate attempt, I decided to address more current issues in the world. I chose to write from my heart — whatever felt right. Instead of an essay, what came out was a poem.

“We chant “*Never again!*” but as I walk to school a young girl is raped.

We chant “*Never again!*” but while I worry about my math test there's a mother worrying if her child will survive to see another day.

We chant “*Never again!*” but at our feet the bodies lay.

We chant “*Never Again!*” but it happens every single second of every wretched day and we do **nothing**.

We live in a ridiculous fantasy that there is peace in this world, that all the past troubles have gone with the wind.

We might as well drop the “never” because genocide seems to happen again and again and again.”

When I first wrote this, I was honestly surprised with myself. I don't think I've ever written a poem because I genuinely wanted to, but this time it felt so natural, as if this was the only outlet through which I could share my message. Creating it helped me gather my thoughts, and figure out why I had decided to write this essay in the first place.

When we learn about the Holocaust, we have difficulty grasping why nobody cared, why so many people allowed it to happen. Society feels as though something so tragic could never

happen nowadays, that the public voice is too powerful, too resilient to allow such cruelty. If we're so ethical, so honest, so incorruptible, then why, at this very moment, do we see genocidal patterns repeating themselves? No matter how powerful or righteous we think we are, it is merely a false image we have painted in order to hide the truth. It's easier to pretend an issue doesn't exist than it is to address it. We have the privilege to close the news app, flip the channel, or scroll to the next post. We have time to relax, to disconnect from the world. One of the reasons Nobel Peace prize winner Elie Wiesel titled his memoir *Night* was because the night was no longer his to experience. In the concentration camps he never got a break, never was able to feel like a human being. The victims of genocides cannot escape their lives as we so often escape the news.

We claim to have learned from the holocaust, but in reality nothing has changed. We — the privileged — make the conscious choice everyday to spend our lives in ignorant bliss. Others are scapegoated and murdered while we turn our backs. We're taught to speak up, stand up, say something, say *anything*. This is ingrained into us as children. But still somehow we don't speak, we remain silent. When we begin to stand up, we sit right back down because it's more comfortable that way. We as a collective society cannot make a difference until we hold ourselves accountable. Stop waiting for somebody else to make the first step.

HOLOCAUST & HUMAN RIGHTS
ART & WRITING CONTEST 2022
HIGH SCHOOL ESSAY
THIRD PLACE
ALEXA TROOB

99My Hebrew school teacher in second grade said that we learn about history, specifically the Holocaust, to prevent atrocities from repeating. And for my eight year old self, that seemed like the end of the discussion. However, as I grew older, learning more about history and current events, I was saddened to lose my innocence and realize that inhumanities were very much prevalent today.

After the Holocaust, we said “never again”, yet atrocities continued with the Cambodian, Rwandan, and Darfur Genocides, to name a few. With each dead body that now reads as numbers of casualties on a textbook page, our promises of “never again” become a little more broken. And I am left wondering how high those numbers need to reach before we learn. Before we find truth in our promises.

As we observe these atrocities, we become witnesses, and it becomes our obligation to prevent another one. This does not mean saying we will do better once the bodies are buried, but recognizing warning signs and acting fast. It is impossible to step in after lives are lost.

First and foremost, each individual must face history. No matter how uncomfortable it is to accept the truth. No matter how badly I wish I could perceive the world through the lens of my eight year old self. But with widely accessible resources, it is our responsibility to learn and to never forget. After educating myself, I made it a priority to use my voice, particularly through writing, to inform others. People must be aware in order to care, and must care in order to act.

And once we learn, we cannot stop there. Words matter, but words are not enough. Time and again, we apologize for our inaction once the damage is done. We need initiatives, not apologies. We need prevention, not mitigation. The words “never again” are empty unless followed by action. Along with advocating through writing, I support organizations that encourage genocide awareness and help refugees. I focus on the difference I can make even on a small scale- whether that means challenging hateful language or ideas in everyday conversations or considering the ethical practices of brands I purchase. And going forward, I will strive to add to

that list of actions, no matter how big or small.

Elie Wiesel tells his story so that we can find the sympathy and strength to act. Listen to victims, rather than waiting until you are one. Until it is too late. Through listening to stories like Wiesel's, we all become witnesses- witnesses with a responsibility to do better. Whether you heard about injustices that affected a friend, family member, or someone on the internet- don't hesitate to use your voice. Don't wait until you are using it to fight for yourself because by that point you might not be able to. Fight for yourself, yes- but also fight for your ancestors, fight for your neighbors, and most importantly fight so that we can say "never again" and mean it.

HOLOCAUST & HUMAN RIGHTS
ART & WRITING CONTEST 2022
HIGH SCHOOL ESSAY
HONORABLE MENTION

NEEL ROY

The Will to Act

“The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it’s indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it’s indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it’s indifference.” - Elie Wiesel, Holocaust Survivor (1928-2016)

Genocide. It is a term known to so many but understood by so few. Combining the ancient Greek prefix “genos”, meaning race, and the Latin suffix “cide”, meaning killing, genocide has plagued the world for generations. Time and time again we hear the tales of unspeakable obliteration; absolute destruction of entire races of people stemming from preconceived notions of inferiority. This desecration serves as a reminder that humans are capable of atrocities far worse than we can imagine, and it is our duty to make sure that these events never occur again. But why should we care?

Living in a predominantly Jewish area, I will admit that I was blissfully unaware of the horrors that World War 2 entailed for Jews, and it was not until I was in middle school that I started to comprehend the magnitude of destruction and devastation they faced. I still do not understand what drives someone to live with such fear, with such hate in their hearts. Nevertheless, the fact remains that as humans, we allowed such annihilation to occur, and we are all partially responsible for the fate of those that died during the Holocaust. We were complicit in that many of us stood by as witnesses, and did nothing as we saw this unfathomable tragedy unfold.

All humans have a moral obligation toward the truth, towards justice. There is an

unspoken contract between people that if someone is being hurt, others must stand up for them to support them. But, we often fail to act, leading to the repeated injustice that poisons peoples' lives every day. Yet we stress the importance of being upstanding citizens, to help others evade mistreatment. Where have we drawn the line? Why are we capable of speaking, but not acting on our words?

The psychology of inaction is a topic that has been debated for decades. There are many arguments, but the prevailing theory is the bystander effect: we may witness a horrific event and still think to ourselves, "I don't need to do anything because I'm not responsible here. There must be other people who should be the ones to step in and intervene." This outlook on life is flawed, and change needs to be enacted for any attempts at reconciliation and justice to be successful.

Regardless, there was no catharsis for those who survived the events of the Holocaust. And as the world continues spinning, war and crime persist, and each death serves as a painful reminder that we as a society have not risen up to the task of fighting injustice. Atrocities start because of hate, but they persist due to indifference. And to fight indifference, we cannot just use our words. We need to have the will.

The will to act.

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HONORABLE MENTION

MARIELLE SEIGEL

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Cyclic Discrimination

A gust of wind hits his face as he opens the door to leave the synagogue after Friday night services. He shoves his Star of David necklace into his pocket as he looks around timidly. He yanks the kippah off of his head, bolting down the block. This exact situation could have happened in Germany in the 1930s, or in the United States in 2022. A rise in antisemitism has caused Jewish individuals to fear—proudly displaying the symbols that make them identifiably Jewish. Likewise, anti-Asian hate has reached an egregious level, with anti-Asian discrimination becoming commonplace in today's society.

11: This is the number of lives lost on October 27, 2018 at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh when a gunman murdered 11 worshipers. The soothing sound of the rabbi's voice during worship clashed with the ricochet of bullets as worshipers feared for their lives in a country that claimed religious tolerance.

8: This is the number of lives lost on March 16, 2021 during the spa shootings in Atlanta. 6 of these individuals were women of Asian descent. Victims hid under tables to avoid persecution based on their identity, something the world agreed would never happen again.

Each curve. Each crevice. Each facet of the silver Star of David on the necklace in my room has taken on a new meaning. While the star embodies a beautiful religion that provides solace to many, the star's sharp edges also represent the pain of persecution. Society has learned an unfortunate lesson from the Holocaust: the persistence of discrimination.

While progress has been made toward ending religious and racial discrimination, there is still a long way to go. StopAntisemitism, an organization whose mission is to expose antisemitic behavior, ranked 25 of America's top corporations on how they addressed workplace discrimination towards Jewish individuals in 2021. Clothing brand American Eagle received an 'A' due to their celebration of Jewish culture through hosting gatherings on Jewish holidays that

provide a space for Jewish colleagues to embrace traditions as well as an opportunity for non-Jewish colleagues to learn more about Jewish culture. Also, in order to create an inclusive holiday gift giving guide, American Eagle utilizes the input of Jewish colleagues in addition to colleagues of different nationalities and religions. However, clothing companies like Gap and Abercrombie & Fitch received a 'D' due to their lack of associate resource groups for the Jewish community. In March of 2021, crowdfunding platform GoFundMe launched the AAPI Community Fund which raises grants for AAPI organizations working to address racial discrimination. By April of 2021, more than \$5 million had been raised from brands like Airbnb and Youtube in addition to the donations of almost 50,000 people. But, in order to dismantle systemic discrimination, companies need to create long-term initiatives that influence both policymakers and the public to work towards the goal of ending religious and racial discrimination.