

2020 First Place Winner
Durham-Chapel Hill Jewish Community Foundation
Holocaust Essay Contest

THE HOLOCAUST: A LEGACY THAT LIVES

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The Holocaust, occurring in German-occupied Europe from 1941 to 1945, was the systematic genocide of six million European Jews and other populations deemed undesirable by the Nazi Party. Leading up to World War II, Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany by promising that he would lead the nation out of its post-war depression. He pushed a false narrative that the Jewish race was inferior to the pure Aryan race, and they were the primary reason for Germany's poor economic standing. By conjuring up German Nationalism, and strong feelings of Anti-Semitism, he led the German Nazi Party in what is now called the Holocaust. Although the Holocaust occurred 80 years ago, it is still relevant to this day.

The lessons of the Holocaust have been ingrained in me since I was just a young girl. Not from public schooling or media, but from my family and our history. My Jewish grandmother was a college student in Amsterdam when the Nazis invaded the Netherlands. Her name was Leonie Snatager, and she had a promising future ahead of her. However, on May 10th, 1940, Leonie was awakened by the sound of loud airplanes overhead. She looked out her window and saw fleets of the German Luftwaffe flying above her. Nearby, she could see German paratroopers occupying the Dutch International Airport of Schiphol, and in the distance she saw billowing clouds of smoke on the horizon. The Nazis had begun the invasion of the Netherlands and they had carpet bombed the Dutch port city of Rotterdam and occupied all of the airports. They declared that if Holland did not stop their resistance then they would bomb all of their major cities. Leonie knew that Amsterdam was one of the largest cities in Holland, but she stayed anyway because she needed to finish college. Despite the fact that Jews were not allowed to attend college during the Nazi occupation, she managed to earn her masters degree in economics from the University of Amsterdam, the first woman to ever do so. Once she obtained her degree, she moved back with her mother in the Hague for it was too dangerous now to stay in Amsterdam.

By the spring of 1941, the situation became desperate for the Jewish population. Jews were no longer allowed to attend universities or even take public transportation. Additionally, they had to wear the Star of David on their clothing to signify that they were Jewish, and register as Jews to the German authorities so they could be relocated into Ghettos with no freedom of movement. These actions, as we now know, were the precursors to genocide. At this point many people were going into hiding in fear of being taken away to a labor camp. Leonie did not immediately go into hiding. However, the Nazis soon took over her mother's apartment and gave them one day to get out. They had to report to the Hague train station to be shipped to a supposed labor camp, which was, in reality, the extermination camp Auschwitz. Along with those orders, they were each issued Jewish Identification cards. Leonie was willing to go to a labor camp to show the Nazis how hard working Jews are. But Leonie's mother was very old and couldn't work, so she went into hiding. Leonie never saw her mother again.

Once Leonie got to the train station for deportation to the East, she heard everyone in line talking nervously. Rumors spread that when you got to the camp they were going to shave your head to delouse you. However, Leonie happened to have red hair, which was very rare for a Jew, and she was quite proud of it. With a newfound desire to survive, she took off her jacket with the Star of David on it and escaped. Everyone in that line perished.

Since Leonie had red hair she could pass for a non-Jew, but she still needed a non-Jewish identification card. She worked with the Dutch underground movement to obtain new identification papers, and she assumed the identity of Jane Lambert, a non-Jewish, Dutch-British citizen. This new identity card enabled her to acquire a position as a maid at a mansion for a year, until the Nazis took control of that

mansion for their own use. Leonie had to go even deeper into hiding. She remembered an old friend living in Amsterdam who would be willing to hide her. This was a brave risk for the man, since the penalty for harboring a Jew was death. Leonie hid in his house with his family until December 1944 when the Hunger Winter began. The Hunger Winter was a most precarious time for the Netherlands, as the Nazis stopped all imports of food or materials from going to Holland to punish the citizenry for resisting. Many starved to death. My grandmother remembers people eating tulip bulbs, shoe leather, and wallpaper to try to survive. She was fully emaciated when North Holland was finally liberated by British paratroopers. Later, she stated that had the British arrived one day later, she would have starved to death.

Being a teenage girl in 2020, and with my significant family history, I find that I have a unique position in society. Sometimes, I feel as though I see the beginnings of genocide where others do not. When I see the Trump administration banning Muslims and placing Mexican children in cages, I am horrified. When I see concentration camps at our southern border and travel bans are being implemented, I am horrified. It is frightening to me to find that the world still doesn't seem to understand the concept of history repeating itself. This same feeling comes over me when I hear some of my most progressive friends making jokes about the Holocaust and stereotyping Jews. I am shocked to hear such comments and feel betrayed. Yet I often think to myself: would I be making light of such a horrific event, had I not had such a personal connection to it? Is this the reason some don't realize the atrocities of the Holocaust? I always come to the same conclusion, that no, one does not need to be personally connected to an issue to realize that it is wrong. I am not Mexican and yet I am outraged by the events happening at the border. I do not practice Islam and yet I recognize the dangerous precedent of placing travel bans on Muslim countries. Still, many don't realize the implications of contemporary hate and racism. This is why the Holocaust is relevant to this day- without empathy and education, it could very well happen again.

My grandmother passed away several years ago, but the lessons she has taught me remain in the forefront of my heart and mind. I remember listening to her giving a talk in her nursing home about her experience in the Holocaust. Although she was very old and fragile, she managed to express the utter atrocities of her time. She ended her speech by introducing to the audience me and all of her grandchildren, to prove that she had bested the Nazi party, and continued her Jewish family. Her words still ring true in my head: "Take that, Hitler!"