

2015 CREATIVE ARTS STUDENT CONTEST

LIBERATION: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED 70 YEARS LATER?

Middle School Writing – First Place

“Tulips in my Hair” By Hillary Dong

PROPERTY OF GEORGIA COMMISSION ON THE HOLOCAUST

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It was Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1943. They told us we were going to be taking showers.

We were packed tightly into the chamber, like sardines in a can. "Arms up!" the Nazi guards shouted at us. We obeyed their orders, fearful of their tempers and for our lives.

"Mama, I'm cold!" I heard a little girl cry.

"Shush, *liebling!*" her mother replied. "Darling, please be quiet!"

I thought of my own family for a second: my mother, my father, my sister Talia, and my baby brother Elijah. Where were they? I missed the warmth of my mother's brown eyes, the same ones baby Elijah and I both carried. I missed Talia's giggles, like bells twinkling in the summer wind, and I missed my father's strength, the strength I so desperately needed then.

The chamber was quickly filled to maximum capacity, and the metal door was slammed shut. I jumped at the sudden bang, disturbing the people surrounding me. "*Entschuldigung!*" I apologized, although soon after, I realized that perhaps not everyone was able to understand me. Not everyone in there was German, were they? Of course not, I was being silly by even entertaining the thought.

I looked around the crowded room. Every last bit of space was taken up – if a human could fit there, then a human was there. The walls and floors were cold and gray; they looked eerie and were stained, but with what, I didn't know. I didn't want to know either. Most faces in the congested space looked confused and weary, although some bore a look of foreboding, as if they could sense the evil that permeated throughout the entire camp. An ominous feeling ran through the room.

Soon, gas began to spread through the chamber. It crept through the nooks and crannies in between all of us, and it made its way into our lungs. The room broke into a panic as we began to realize what was happening. Some people began to claw at their throats, desperate to breathe. Those closest to the door began to scream. "Let me out!" they hollered, distress evident in their voices. "Please, I don't want to die!"

I felt myself getting lightheaded. Was it true, what people said about dying? I heard once that you saw your entire life flash before your eyes before you passed. How could this happen? I was barely sixteen years old; my life hadn't yet been lived! How could I die? I might as well have still been a child! Yet, looking around me, I realized that there were many much younger than myself drawing their last breaths, like the little girl who earlier had clung onto her mother. The extermination of all these people,

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all these innocent people... it was an act way beyond cruelty, way beyond evil. How could any human be compliant in genocide?

"Oh, please Adonai; don't let my last moments be in here!" I wept. The gas chamber was despicable beyond words. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of souls were being swept away in a matter of what? Fifteen minutes? I never knew that hatred could run so deep as to be a catalyst for such unimaginable depravity. We were unfit for Hitler's perfect race, and so we were being massacred, and somehow, it was considered okay.

My consciousness continued to slip away from me. I could hardly think anymore. "Adonai, this can't actually happening," I sobbed. "Adonai, please save my soul!" I didn't want to die! My life was yet unfulfilled; I had so much more living to do! This wasn't right! In fact, it was so horribly wrong it didn't quite seem real. In no version of reality could such unfathomable evil exist; it just couldn't be!

Quick, Ziva! I thought to myself. *Think of a happier time! Please!* Even if I had to physically spend the last of my life in that wretched hell, I didn't want to spend the last of my life mentally there. I let memories of an earlier time, a better time take me away.

"Remember Amsterdam?" I said to myself. "The cobblestone on the streets, and running, playing, laughing with Esther and Liese? Or Ruth's birthday party? We were all so cheerful..." Soon enough, I could no longer speak, but I continued to try and think of happier days. *Remember when Sarah used to cut the tulips from her mother's garden and we'd try to wear them in our hair? She always wore the pink ones; I would wear the yellow because she said they stood out on me...*

The memories slowed to a stop, and soon enough, like everyone else, my mind and body shut down completely. There was no happy ending to my story, and never again did I skip down the streets of Amsterdam. Never again did I gossip with my friends or hug my mother or my father. Never again did I tell my sister that I love her or kiss my baby brother's head as he contentedly fell asleep, and never again did I wear tulips in my hair.