

FIRST PLACE HIGH SCHOOL PROSE

The Importance of Words

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Words. Something we do not appreciate often, yet where would our society be without them? Lawyers are notorious for being able to craft words in a way to justify the unjustifiable. My father was a lawyer. We were separated early in the war, but if he could have spoken to me, even he would not have been able to delineate why I was left to my own devices as a 14 year old child, forced to silently watch my people be murdered. There is an infinite number of combinations of words, and not one can justify the Holocaust.

We never imagined anything could happen to us; it seemed unreal. March 19, 1944. The day the Nazis entered Budapest. I was terrified, but I remember my parents' words: it will not happen to us. I know now anything can happen. In June, we moved into the ghetto, and I felt like I was awakening from a dream. In October, while everyone rejoiced that the war was over, I was not convinced, now fully awake from my dream. The horrors had yet to begin.

Once my parents were captured, "I started to be a grown-up"(timestamp, 28:17). I decided I had to escape to survive. I turned to a Hungarian soldier for help, but I was caught. A Gestapo man holding a gun to my ribs then forced me into a building to watch a hundred men and women being whipped more brutally than cattle. Looking into another section of the cellar, I saw three bodies nailed to the wall by their ankles, bleeding out. The Nazis began to herd the half-dead Jews into a narrow tunnel in the wall, and I made a split-second decision to join them. I will never forget the screams when the Nazis closed the opening. Several succumbed to their exhaustion, and the screams were replaced with the scuttling and squeaking of rats that came to feast. We were released after a day and a half.

Time passed. Amongst the rubble of millions of tortured, dead bodies, words are all that remained, yet many survivors stayed silent. Finding words to describe the indescribable takes time and courage. At the Nuremberg Trials, even lawyers, the most skilled crafters of sentences, struggled to find words. But Georgia Gabor found her words and spoke them to me in her interview. Elie Wiesel found his words, too, and I read them in his memoir. Art Spiegelman found words for his graphic novels and utilized cats and mice as symbols to make the Holocaust more tangible to his child. I learned recently that Spiegelman's books as well as others were removed from schools for their unsettling content. It takes courage to share these words, so we must be "grown up" and sit with the discomfort they evoke rather than silence them. Without these words, books, and stories, we leave ourselves blind and unarmed to fight for a better future. I choose to set the unsettling truth of words free, not to bury or burn them.