

FIRST PLACE HIGH SCHOOL PROSE

Storyteller

Norah Chowdhury, Grade 10

Sunny Hills High School, Fullerton, CA

Teacher: Christina Zubko

Testimony: Selene Bruk

It is very dark, except for the dim flicker of the lightbulb above his head. He moves quickly and quietly. Death lurks behind the door in front of him. He packs up his belongings, and with them, his future. He opens the door to war and poverty, to a homeland of ruins. He does not care. Although wealthy, no amount of glitter or gold is worth the weight of blood. He walks through the door and into the night.

One thousand five hundred seventy-eight miles away, the sun begins to rise, and another man, revered in his community, throws his life to the flame. He is maligned for decrying the slaughter of children deemed “ethnic abominations” and watches as his reputation is torn to pieces by his own clients. Yet he never relents – from a stack of newspapers that spell out genocide in the headlines he hears God implore him to take action. Any hope of him and his family living in anything but utter poverty is gone, and they are forced to hide for their lives.

Those are the stories of my grandfathers, Mohammad Ullah and Wazed Chowdhury, during the Bengali Genocide of 1971. Their tales have been etched in my mind since childhood. Mohammed abandoned the lavish life he had working for and living with the genociders and escaped to Bangladesh. Wazed, a lawyer, destroyed his family and fortunes by denouncing the horrific and daily slaughter of innocent Bengalis.

Her story starts with the bombs. Like angels of death, they plummet over her head in their home of Bialystok, Poland. She watches helplessly as the life she loved is stripped away from her. Overnight, the Nazi forces burn the Jewish quarter of Bialystok to the ground, forcing its citizens to relocate to the ghetto. At ten years old, she slaves first moving bricks. The bricks and nails gash her fingers. Then she is moved to a factory where a fellow worker is the first to tell Selene that she must one day tell their stories: “I know you will survive... tell my children what happened to me.”

Selene’s story was one of pain. Stutthof, Birkenau, Auschwitz, Ravensbrück, Neustadt. Five different concentration camps, yet all cut from one cloth, a fabric of sorrow. Even after it unraveled, she found that the streets of her beloved Poland had been paved with the blood of Jews in her absence.

Selene’s story was one of silence for a long time, until she realized that if she didn’t tell her story, it would be forgotten and repeat itself. She vowed to retell the pain of her past and did so until her death in 2011. I will answer the call of memory by constantly telling the stories of those ravaged by genocide, from Holocaust survivors like Selene to victims of more modern mass murders like my grandfathers, lest we see them slip into the dark once again. I choose to shine a light.