

*Justice in the Hands of Humanity*

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Survivor Testimony: Leopold Page

Humanity is a complex idea. On one level, it simply means being human. On another level, however, it means being humane. What is the difference? Justice.

Leopold Page realized how important justice is to humanity when justice was denied him. Born Leopold Pfefferberg on March 20, 1913, in Krakow, Poland, he grew up surrounded by happiness, protection, and love. However, in 1939 Germany invaded Poland and began forcing the Jewish population into ghettos. Leopold and his wife, Ludmila, were ordered into the Krakow ghetto in 1941.

In the ghetto, Leopold was a witness to unimaginable horrors. He saw men and women brutalized. He saw children killed for no reason. Much of the time he was starving or freezing or in pain. Every comfort he had ever known—his family, his friends, his livelihood—was unjustly taken from him.

In March 1943, the Jews living in the Krakow ghetto were sent to the Plaszow concentration camp. There, Leopold and Ludmila eventually began working in the factory of Oskar Schindler. When Schindler moved his factory to Brünnlitz, Czechoslovakia, in November 1944, the Jewish workers moved with it. It was in Brünnlitz that Leopold Page was forced to choose between justice and revenge.

By the end of 1944, it had become clear that the tide had turned and Germany was losing the war. The Nazis did not want any witnesses to the atrocities that had taken place in the ghettos and concentration camps. So as Russian troops advanced from the east and American, English, and French soldiers approached from the west, the Nazis ordered the liquidation of all remaining camps. On May 7, 1945, approximately 50 SS officers entered the Brünnlitz camp intending to kill the Jews still living there. What they did not know was that the Jews in Brünnlitz had been warned by Oskar Schindler and were prepared to fight. As the SS officers entered the camp, they were surrounded and disarmed. Almost all of the 1300 prisoners demanded that the SS officers be killed immediately. After all, weren't these the monsters who had stolen their belongings, beaten them, and killed their families and friends? Didn't they deserve to die?

Amazingly, Page and the other Jewish leaders did not allow the SS officers to be killed. Instead, they held the officers for three days and then turned them over to the Russian troops who officially liberated the camp. "We are human and we behave as a human people," Page explains in his testimony. "We behave like a cultured people."

Leopold Page and the other Jewish leaders at Brünnlitz chose to champion justice, not revenge. In the years following his liberation, Page testified at the trials of several Nazis. He believed that justice would prevail. Although he realized that some of those officers probably went free eventually, Leopold never regretted choosing not to kill them when he had the chance.

Despite all of the animosity and discrimination he witnessed during the Holocaust, Leopold Page put his faith in humanity. So now we owe it to him and to all victims of hate to be worthy of that faith. We owe it to them to deliver justice.

Today, however, we often rush to judgement instead of to justice. We need to remember what justice really is. Justice is a legal system that protects everyone, regardless of race, religion, or orientation. It is a system that applies laws evenly, regardless of age, social class, or country of origin. It is a system that holds all offenders accountable, regardless of power, connections, or financial resources.

Leopold Page recognized that we have the ability to choose who we will be as people. His story reminds us how closely justice is tied to humanity. Justice is the difference between being a human and being a *decent* human; choosing it means choosing to have faith in the best part of ourselves. At the end of the day, the choice is ours.