

First Prize Prose, Middle School Division

*Blind Trust*

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Survivor Testimony, Barry Bruk

Labeling allows people to easily prejudge a group without considering individual traits. From what I have seen, I would say that labeling is the most common form of discrimination--through propaganda and stereotype-enforcing cartoons and jokes, Adolf Hitler took advantage of labeling by inflating and appealing to the fears of the masses: that Jews, as a race, were the destroyers of the German economy. Nostalgic desperation for pre-World War I Germany was exactly what made people blind to what was to come. Hitler's promises and Nazi propaganda exploited that weakness. If we do not remember what comes of blind trust from desperation then the memories of the Holocaust survivors will become obsolete. Although these are memories of the past, we must learn from them so we can judge events today and in the future.

Listening to the memories of Barry Bruk, a Hasidic Jew from Lodz, Poland, I began to understand the results of such manipulation. Consider the moment when Bruk and others were stuffed into cattle cars and sent to Auschwitz. This treatment was the last stage in the vicious dehumanization of Bruk and other Jews, those who Bruk describes as the "the sea of humanity," although it is just this "humanity" of which they were being deprived. Upon arrival, they were separated by physical aptitude without regard for family relations. Everyone deemed incapable was sent to the gas chambers to be eliminated. Bruk's mother was one such person. As he tried to pull his mother into his line, he was kicked in the back and berated with the Nazis' consistent "Jews are animals" metaphor; he was literally called a "dirty dog."

The United States was founded upon the rejection of xenophobia and upon respect for the rights to all. Yet the intolerance of differences still occurs today. Some prominent political figures claim that homosexuals should not be given equal rights to heterosexuals. They appeal to the fear that doing so will endanger our cultural heritage. Are they encouraging us to become blindly nostalgic? Unfortunately, fear-mongering and labeling can occur anywhere. Recently, a hardware chain pulled its ads from a reality television show about American Muslims to avoid controversy with a group that sees Muslims as potential terrorists rather than as individuals with their own traits, like other Americans.

We must learn to judge with consistent values both events and people and watch for those who exploit fear and further hatred. Listening to the memories of those who survived to witness reminds us that we must keep our eyes open to what is going on around us so that we prevent future catastrophes. We owe it to Barry Bruk, as well as to every other Holocaust victim, to remain vigilant.