

*My Purpose*  
Grace Min, Grade 8  
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Survivor Testimony: Renée Firestone

As I listen to Renée's testimony, I am faced with a difficult question. What is Renée's purpose, and therefore, what is mine? I search for answers in her words, trying to understand her pain and agony. As a fourteen-year-old who lives an all too easy life, it is a challenge to relate to Renée. So I take a look back into her life:

It is April 1944. In Czechoslovakia, Renée is arrested by the Gestapo and transported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. She spends three, long days on a train powered by death. The strong aroma of the overflowing waste bucket fills her lungs. People are dying around her, suffocating, longing for a breath of fresh air. The doors finally open and the bright light is blinding. Men, in uniform, order and shout at Renée and her fellow Jews to exit the car immediately and leave everything behind. Renée holds tight to her sister Clara and searches the frantic crowd for her parents. A man points Renée and Clara to the right as they both look back at their parents, who are directed to the left, not knowing this would be the last time they would see them.

It is September 1944. After weeks of beatings and starvation, Renée is unjustly separated from her beloved sister. She wakes up every morning, eager to see Clara's face through the barbed wire, knowing she is still barely alive. One morning she is not there. *She is just upset about Yom Kippur*, Renée thinks. *She'll be back tomorrow*, she hopes. Next day, still no sign of her. Three days pass, Renée never went back to the barbed wire again.

It is January 1995. Renée returns to what remains of Auschwitz. She stands on the corroding train tracks and sees crowds of frightened people, oblivious to their fate. She stands in the middle of the place she once called "hell," and looks up at the black smoke from the 24 hour-running crematoria. She inhales the ashes of her ruthlessly murdered mother and sister. She watches her fellow Jews deliberately throwing themselves onto the high voltage fences, she sees her sister running towards her mother in hopes she will kiss her one last time, she witnesses innocent people being shaved, stripped, and beaten.

This is when I discovered Renée's purpose: to keep the memory of the Holocaust alive. To teach her daughter, granddaughter, and future generations about the unspeakable horrors, so it is never forgotten. Renée felt it was her obligation to share her story, to honor her mother and sister, "I hope my mother and my sister can hear me now, it is their martyrdom that helped me until now, to try to tell the world what happened here."

Tears roll down her cheeks as Renée struggles to find the words to describe her life in the extermination camp, hoping people will understand the terrors. She shares a story of unbearable pain and sorrow, reliving each terrifying memory, hoping it will never be forgotten. Renée asks us, "please don't ever forget, please don't let the world ever forget...." This is when I discovered my purpose--our purpose; to keep Renée's memory alive, and ensure the Holocaust is never forgotten by sharing her story and the stories of other survivors. We are building a foundation for future generations. It is our obligation, our job, to teach our children that stories such as Renée's cannot be ignored or forgotten. Renée has done her job by sharing her story; now it is our job to keep it alive and continue Renée's legacy for the sake of our own future.