

The Smallest Actions
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Survivor Testimony: Renée Firestone

April 30, 1975. Saigon, Vietnam. This was the day that my parents' lives changed. This was the day they were forced to flee from their homes in fear of death. My parents frantically ran around, gathering personal belongings and items. They were running out of time. They hurried to the docks and boarded a boat where my mother met her family. They slowly drifted out to the vast and distant sea. They became lost, without a place to be, without a place to go, and without a place to call home.

Early 1945. Auschwitz-Birkenau, Poland. Renee Firestone, a mere twenty years old, was in the barracks with other prisoners awaiting the morning roll call. It never came. Hours passed, and all of the prisoners nervously sat around, not knowing what to expect. Finally, a brave soul dared to venture out into the unknown. The door opened. The frigid wind swept through the doorway, enveloping the barracks in a blanket of coldness. Silence. The brave soul walked into the courtyard. The silence was broken by the screams of prisoners. These screams were not the screams of terror, but were ones filled with utter joy. To their surprise, the Germans had fled the camp overnight, in fear of the advancing Russian forces. Soon after the Germans fled, the Russians arrived. The Russians and the prisoners rejoiced alike. They feasted and celebrated. Renée, along with the other prisoners, had been freed from the hell where they had lost so much. Renee was without her family, without a place to go, and without a place to call home.

Late 1975. Unknown. My parents traveled from country to country, refugee camp to refugee camp, searching for my father's family and a place to call home. Their travels by boat lasted for months. They faced days, if not weeks of starvation and desperation. During their journey, they encountered several people and families who provided them with food and shelter. Eventually, they settled in California, found a place to call home, and established a new family encompassing the past and future.

Early 1945. Renee, after being freed from Auschwitz-Birkenau, traveled to her home country of Czechoslovakia, where a kind restaurateur fed her and gave her a place to sleep. In the following months and years, Renee walked and hitchhiked for painstakingly long hours to refugee camps across Europe. Eventually, she too settled in California, found a place to call home, and established a new family.

October 11, 1994 & Present day. Renee states that her purpose for sharing her experience of the Holocaust is to teach that "each individual human being has to be judged by his own merit, who he is, what he does, and how he acts." If not for the kindness in others' hearts, if not for the people who looked beyond perceivable appearances, neither my parents, nor Renee, would be here today. It is from their past experiences and memories that Renee and my parents have been able to illustrate the necessity of extending even the smallest act of kindness and generosity to others. By extending kindness and generosity throughout our daily lives, we, too, can improve the lives of those around us. Through small actions, we can have life changing impacts on the people who need us the most.