

The Barrier of Life

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“For the dead and the living – we must bear witness” –Elie Wiesel

A witness, by definition is one who sees an event take place at a certain time and absorb all of its occurrences; one who is present and has the ability to testify to evidence provided at that occasion. If a witness is present, then they have the ability to claim the actual truth of an event. However, to be a witness, must you have the strength and courage to stand up and say you are a witness? Thousands upon thousands of people are alive today and free to say they have witnessed certain crimes and accidents that they only wish they could erase from their memories. A witness is the medium that lies between the truth and a story.

Throughout my years of attending a Jewish school, in some way, shape, or form, we have been studying about the atrocities of the Holocaust. Though as awful as this may sound, I felt as though I had become desensitized to it. After learning so much, I did not truly believe that there was much more for me to learn and that it was all becoming too surreal for me to absorb. However, I could see through my teachers' passion to educate their students on this subject, I knew that this was something on which I truly needed to further my education. But this time, not in a classroom, I needed to experience it first hand.

This past year, I was fortunate enough to take part on a trip of a lifetime, known as March of the Living. Ten thousand Jewish people from across the world and I marched together hand in hand to honour and commemorate the six million who perished in the Holocaust. Within these two weeks, my perspective on the Holocaust had changed entirely. Each day was a new experience: To use all five senses in one place; to smell the leather of an old shoe, to feel the sharpness of the barbed wire, to hear the cries of a mother being separated from her child, to taste the tears showering my cheeks, to see the death that was all around me.

While walking through Majdanek, which was the last camp that we entered during our time in Poland, we were rudely awakened with each step we made. Each step I took, I became more confused, more saddened, and definitely more aware. Birds were chirping, flowers were growing, and the grass was greener than I had ever seen before. A place that was so dead and lifeless, felt so alive at the same time. How could a place filled with such horror and death, feel so calm and peaceful? But of course, that was only from the outside looking in. Each step closer, I took hold of my friend's hand, I knew

that it was not going to be easy. Our tour guide told us that each step we would take in this camp would get harder and harder. We had already experienced so much in one camp, how was anything supposed to be more difficult than it already was. Barracks were filled with worn out shoes, a crematorium with empty cans of gas, and of course the scratched out messages carved along the edges of each bunk bed. But no, that was not the hard part that our tour guide was telling us about. It was the final monument that we visited. The ashes left behind at this camp, put together to form one monument. Shock, disbelief, disgust, I did not know how or what to feel. I noticed people around me crying, though the tears were not filling my eyes. Pure shock was all I felt. These were not even half of the ashes that were left from this camp. A girl standing next to me was being interviewed, though it was hard to understand, her great-grandfather had perished at this camp. She was finally in the presence of someone she only hoped she could have met, though the barrier between the two of them was life.

Professor Gill Troy was a keynote speaker at our final ceremony in Israel. During his speech he stated, "Our survivors... you're not survivors, you are thrivers! You are heroes!" This statement stuck with me. I do not believe that this statement would have meant anything to me before having experienced the entire trip of March of the Living. Having only a small glance of what our people had gone through, what they did while maintaining their Jewish faith, was unbelievable. These people did not survive, they flourished, and they thrived. A survivor is not a profound enough word to describe what our people overcame. They are true heroes, not only them, but those who perished as well. A "survivor" does not explain how mind-blowing and unbelievable it is that they are here today. It does not explain how absolutely thankful we are to have them, which is why to me, they are heroes.

We visited the Lupochowa Forest in Poland, where over 2,000 Jews of the shtetl of Tykocin were shot. We heard a story about a young girl who was shot, but was not killed. She then had to survive while her family and community members fell to their deaths on top of her. Suddenly, a bright and sunny day had become cold. Shivers ran down my spine, as I lit a candle in honour of her family. My feelings had become numb by this point. I looked to my left, I looked to my right, and I was surrounded by nature. Trees, plants, flowers, were all living and growing. These were the true witnesses. These trees witnessed then and they witness now, and they will likely be witnesses for generations to come. What these trees have seen, are hopefully what no one else will ever see again. They know the exact truths, and they were present through everything, though they do not have a voice to tell us what they witnessed. Therefore, I can now attempt to speak on their behalf.

I have seen, I have felt, and I have heard. I am not alive today to take advantage of why I am here. My job here will never be done; I am speaking for the generations of the past who no longer have a voice. I must speak to the generations of the future who can transmit every message I give them. These monuments, camps, cemeteries, will not be here forever. This is the time. Our history, our Jewish past, is much too vital to ignore, forget or take advantage of. We are down to our last few heroes; so we must listen and learn. We must bear witness; I am a witness and will continue to thrive as a witness.

I am a Jewish girl, and along with ten thousand other Jewish people, we all are witnesses and will be witnesses for the rest of our lives.