

“I Was Only Thirteen”

By: Jacob Kulig

St. Vincent-St. Mary High School

Word Count: 826

It all started with words.

I am only thirteen; it is 1933. Adolf Hitler has been appointed “Chancellor,” though I am not exactly sure what the title really means. There is food on the table and my parents seem less worried. As for my friend, Gersham, his father Mr. Kreiner can no longer be a professor. He keeps telling me, “I cannot conceive why they do not permit us to teach anymore.” Then his books are outlawed, taken by the police. As for my father and mother, they keep telling me, “Never harm anyone, be the good boy you have always been. Always keep your eyes open and be ready to help.” The radio, however, blares that we must free ourselves from Jews and their money. We must harm those who have hurt us.

I can never forget those words.

I am fifteen; it is 1935. The Nuremberg laws have been approved, Jews are now a race. A race we must ward off. Not citizens, but thorns that pierce our society. Do I believe them? The words echo in my ears, “Never harm anyone.” The others echo too: “Those of the same blood belong in the same Reich!” What shall I do? Friends in the Hitlerjugend, economy improving, yet non-Aryans devastated, insight burned, smoking in the street. Gersham is now nothing but a fleeting memory lost in the mist; he can no longer be my friend.

It all started with words.

I am sixteen; it is 1936. Berlin. All the countries in the world support us, America has not boycotted the games. What were those horrifying issues with the Nazi party? Some call their words propaganda, some salvation. What shall I do? “Never harm anyone” still rings sharply in my ears, but to not support my country may be even worse. The enemies have hurt us, after all, but the party is succeeding; the buildings tower around us and jobs for all Germans abound. World War I, its loss, its destruction, its horror long in the past. But where to now? They are not

yet all powerful; they have not yet succeeded once and for all: Owens did win four golds. I do not know where we are traveling, yet somehow I perceive the destination. I do not want to know.

I can never forget those words.

I am eighteen; it is 1938. November 9th, 1938. Later known as Kristallnacht. By now, what is historically despised as anti-semitism is our way of life. Their shops ransacked, their synagogues shattered, their lives ruined? “Never harm anyone.” Yet is that not what everyone has done? Would someone not do something if this, if everything were truly wrong? I walk through the streets of Breslau as the smoke rises on the horizon; I remember Gersham, the day his prayer book was taken from his trembling hands, when it was said “This is not approved to be read. Who are you to decide what is?”

It all started with words.

I am nineteen; it is 1939. To the front, but for what purpose now? To serve others, to serve my country? “Never harm anyone.” But is that not precisely what we are fighting for? I hear in each letter my family is well, the Reich is prospering. But at what cost? Ghettos, full of those we are told harm us, destroy us. Gersham, Mr. Kreiner: long gone; they must be there. “Will you join them?” he asked me that day. “No, I will never join them, I will always be your friend.” Who am I now? I am fighting to preserve that idea, those dark Ghettos.

I can never forget those words.

I am twenty-five; it is 1945. The end of the war; the beginning of my questions. How was I so ignorant? How could I be so evil? How did my country – how did I accept this? I am captured, for now, a prisoner of war. What were we really fighting for? Now I begin to see. I am taken to a fence, bid that I march into the stench, into the horror I once thought was banished from the earth. I was fighting for more than Ghettos, for more than an idea. The small buildings,

the dirt, the barbed wire show me this must be a prisoner of war camp. But it is not that, I must accept this is more. The heavy air, the looming smokestack, finally the dead lying on the ground. I know this is what transpired; this is what I fought for: mere words translated into abject brutality. There in the dust must lie my friend, what my words, what our words have done! I hear the American soldier; my friend translates, “This is what the Nazis did to the Jewish people, to anyone they hated. I do not understand how anyone could fight for such a cause.” I was only thirteen.

It all started with words.

We can never forget those words.

Works Cited

- “Camp System: Maps.” Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/gallery/camp-system-maps?parent=en%2F4656. 31 January 2019.
- “Concentration Camps, 1933-39.” Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/concentration-camps-1933-39. 31 January 2019.
- “Ghettos.” Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ghettos. 31 January 2019.
- “Jewish Last Names.” FamilyEducation, www.familyeducation.com/baby-names/browse-origin/surname/jewish. 30 January 2019.
- Simmons, Rabbi Shraga. “Boys’ Names” aish.com, 31 December 2006, www.aish.com/jl/l/b/48967016.html. 31 January 2019
- “A Teacher’s Guide to the Holocaust, Timeline.” Florida Center for Instructional Technology, College of Education, University of Southern Florida, 2005, fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/timeline/timeline.htm. 30 January 2019
- Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. Bantam Books, 1982.