

Third Place
Fiction Writing, Division II
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Our Lady of the Elms
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From Boy to Man
986 words

When I was a boy, I had a friend who was a Jew. I don't remember his name, but I do remember how my Mama reacted when she found out. She told the Jewish boy with curly red hair that Germans don't associate with filthy Jews. I didn't think he was filthy; he had good manners and smelled clean. Mama said some other words she wouldn't dare say to my other friends. I remember he sobbed and looked at me for help. But how was I supposed to help him when I didn't understand why she was saying hurtful words to him? I just stood there because I didn't want Mama to think I was disobedient.

Mama gave me a whole lesson as to why I shouldn't associate with Jews. I wasn't listening; I could only think about my friend's feelings. Was he going to stop being friends with me? The next day, I prepared myself for the worst. Suddenly, he hugged me. I was dumbfounded. "Why are you hugging me? You are the one who was scolded." The next words he spoke shocked me: "Don't worry, I deserved it." I was furious. Why did he say that? No one deserves that, not even people I don't like. "No, you didn't deserve it; Mama was in the wrong, and I'm sorry." That made him tear up. "You are the nicest German I have ever met." I didn't know what he meant. Wasn't every German nice?

One day, Mama told me I was going to a camp called the Hitler Youth. I had heard about the camp, and my friends said they couldn't wait to join. I was excited to participate. I heard that the Hitler Youth was a fun, safe environment. We would get nice clothes, and make new friends. I was sad that I was leaving my Jewish friend, but I had to go. When I got to the camp, there were boys with nice uniforms, and they laughed like they were having the time of their lives. All the older boys treated me as if I were their younger brother. When I was crying one night because I

missed Mama, one of the older boys, Gunther, told me stories until I could close my eyes.

Gunther was like a big brother to me. One day, Gunther, his friends, and I were outside eating lunch when we saw a young Jew asking us for food. What I saw next made me angry. Gunther and his friends laughed and spat on the young boy. Gunther said, "Why would we give you food? You're going to die anyway." After that day, I distanced myself from Gunther and his friends.

It was November 13, 1937. I had eaten plenty of food, and I wore a fresh uniform. On my way to camp, I saw five young Jewish men lined up with knives to their throats. Gunther was holding one of the knives. I stopped. Is this what Hitler Youth do? Gunther was laughing. "Kill," he shouted. All five Jews dropped to the ground, screaming. Gunther and his followers laughed, but I could not.

In 1938, I had to kill a man for the first time. I was sixteen. My "brother" and I were walking alongside a work camp when we spotted a Jew taking a break. The older "brothers" smirked at each other. "You know the rules, no break. You work for your liberty." I didn't know his name. The Jew put on a hard face and nodded, ready to get back to work. Then my arrogant "brother" spat at the Jew. The Jew's demeanor changed and he did something no one expected: he spat right back. My "brother" ended up punching him, and taking him to the ground, but the Jew wasn't giving up. The Jew kicked him, and Gunther went down, with the Jew on top, punching him. I froze. I knew I had to do something, but how could I, when my so called brother deserved this. I did what I thought I had to do. The Jew dropped dead with one shot to his head.

It was 1942 when I saw him. He wasn't the same boy I grew up with. He was taller, and thin. I recognized him because of his eyes. He was bald, and his eyes weren't full of life as I

remembered. How could they be? It was then that he saw me, and a look of betrayal was on his face. Why was he shocked? He must have known that I had to join the Hitler Youth. I was also confused. I thought if I ever saw him again, I would cry out with joy. But I wasn't happy, and he wasn't glad to see me. We moved past each other as if we had never met.

As a soldier, I was commanded to kill prisoner 18365. I didn't think much about it; I was used to killing by now. But what I didn't expect was that it was the little Jewish boy. The Jewish boy I used to play with, the Jewish boy whom I had secretly given bread because he was hungry, the Jewish boy that I used to like—now I didn't feel anything towards him. It wasn't personal. It was what I had been taught. I made sure no one was around when I said to him, "I'm sorry it had to be like this. I don't want to do it, but I have to." I will never forget the words he said to me. He smiled and said, "My name is Tivah Cohen, not 18365." He was smiling, knowing he was going to die, and not by just anyone, but by me, the boy with whom he had been friends. With a shaky voice, I replied, "My name is Leon Hartman, and I'm sorry." And I shot him.

The next day, I shot myself.

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