

First Place Division II - Writing

Gianna Carozza-Tyler, Grade 9

“My Hertzeleh”

Our Lady of the Elms

Elaine Fippin, Instructor

998 words

Welcome to the free world, my Hertzeleh. I hope when you're older you never question why people call Mama 'strong,' or why they still shout slurs at me when they see my star. I hope you never question why Papa cuddles you like it's your last day together.

My Hertzeleh, I remember the day my world crumbled- July 5th of 1944. I donned a dress your Zayde gifted me. I, however, made a tweak your Zayde disliked.

"You can't go out like that, Rachel," he stopped me at the door.

"It's my faith. I'll wear it proudly," I retorted, the yellow Star of David gleaming boldly on my chest.

"They're looking. They could take you."

"They won't," I scoffed. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have errands," I said, shoving him out of the way.

Yes, my Hertzeleh, I used to be a spoiled little German girl. Your Bubbe was a martyr—a Jewish florist closing her shop around eleven, right when bystanders became aggressors. Suddenly the people she'd known for years were murderers, and the blood on their hands was hers. Her death caused your Zayde, an Aryan businessman, to spoil me.

I hadn't even made it a mile from my home when the officers seized me in their impeccable uniforms, dark as their souls with the emboldened swastika surrounded in red like the blood of men they've probably killed.

"You're to come with us," one officer wrapped his hand in my blonde hair.

"Why?" I pretended to be oblivious as tears streamed down my cheeks.

"This," the other officer grabbed my dress where the Star of David shone brightly.

"Alright, I'm Jewish. Why's that of any concern to you?" I tried to ignore the burning in my scalp.

"Take her away." The officer gripping my dress let go.

"Yessir." The other officer's grip tightened in my hair.

He dragged me by the scalp for an eternity. I wanted to scream that I was German, but the Star of David on my chest was burning hot, like God was daring me to disobey His divine plan, which even I wasn't stupid enough to do. I could feel warm blood dripping from my scalp to my cheeks.

"Get in, Jew!" the officer threw me into a full, reeking train car. He slammed the door behind me.

I slid down against the splintering wood, tears prickling my eyes.

The guards at Auschwitz treated me better because I was German, but that didn't mean I was treated well, or that I didn't witness terrible horrors.

"What's your name?" An officer slid next to me while I ate rotten soup.

"1729885" I recited my number.

"No," he said gently, "Your real name."

"Rachel," I said quietly.

"Do you want more food, Rachel?" He took pieces of bread from his uniform.

"Yes, please."

He quickly handed me the bread.

"My supervisor's coming. Eat," he grazed my thigh as he stood.

I wolfed it down because the rotten food at Auschwitz was made more for dogs than people.

For months he snuck me food, gently tracing my skin as he did. I had to admit, I'd fallen for his touch and kindness.

That was until nine months ago.

I was sewing uniforms in a drafty building with an elderly woman who couldn't labor much when the officer approached me.

"What?" I looked up from my work.

"Come with me," the officer said, offering me a hand.

I followed him into a secluded area like a sheep following the herd. Little did I know, I was really following a wolf in the thinnest disguise that shouldn't have fooled me, but the times were so hard, and my eyes covered in glitter.

"There are rumors that the Red Army's pushing into camps. Soon you might be gone. I can't let them take you," he said, eyes devilish.

He pinned my hands above me and pushed me against the wall. I begged him to stop, but he was much stronger as he tore my clothes and ravaged the body I believed was sacred. I shrieked as he pulled away, feeling blood on my legs. It was over quickly, but the shame lingered as I helplessly slid down the wall.

A grimy prisoner rushed in to save me. He acted swiftly, making sure the guard couldn't escape.

He stabbed a sewing needle into the guard's neck twice . The guard's neck sprayed blood as his hands tried to cover the wounds.

“Ratten,” the guard hissed his final breath.

“I heard you screaming... I was a doctor’s apprentice... it's my job to help,” the prisoner elaborated..

“How old are you, son?” The old woman asked him once we’d gotten back to the main part of the building.

“Seventeen.”

“Seventeen,” the woman’s eyes misted, “I hardly remember being seventeen or any age really without being in constant agony.”

“I- I’m sorry,” your Papa shifted uncomfortably, holding my limp body awkwardly in his arms.

“Don’t be sorry, son. You’re too young to carry the burdens of regret.” The woman set down her needle and looked in Papa’s eyes, “You’re too young to die for this.”

“It’s my job to help.”

“And it’s my job to die, so let me. Please,” the woman begged.

“It was me!” I screamed as her rope was tied.

“No it wasn’t,” Papa hissed..

I sobbed as the woman was hanged. I wondered if she still had to be judged by the divine because she’d already been judged enough as it was. Nobody else made a sound. They just

glanced around wearily, wondering when work would begin again. I wondered how they couldn't care.

My Hertzeleh, with every beat of your little heart and every blink of your perfect eyes, you are proof to those in dissent that these horrors did happen. I hope when you're older you never have to face the terrors others like you have faced. I hope when you're older, you will be a blaze against darkness and denial: my Hertzeleh, my little heart.

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