

Honorable Mention

Division I – Writing

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Witness in Steel

Word Count 515

Witness in Steel

I am a barbed wire, stretched cold and tight across the gates of Treblinka. I was placed here to suppress joy, to trap bodies and break spirits. I was forged to be cruel, sharp and unwelcoming. My purpose was simple, to wound and to intimidate. I was meant to be a symbol of fear. Yet what I witnessed was the opposite of what I was created for. Behind me and beyond me I saw love. Families found ways to smile, to laugh quietly, to hold one another close even when the world tried to tear them apart. I watched people form prayer groups in whispers, build schools in secret and create moments of learning and faith, even when the Nazis tried to crush every trace of happiness and dignity. Hope became their shield. Even when they were starving, ill and exhausted beyond words, they did not surrender their humanity. Their hope gave them strength when their bodies couldn't. When loved ones died they mourned, while remaining hopeful for their own survival. They comforted each other and remained kind even while surrounded by cruelty. And I, the barbed wire meant to threaten them became something...else.

I saw prisoners climb across me, hands bleeding, clothing torn, driven not by despair but by resistance. Some tried to escape but most did not survive. When their bodies fell silent beneath me I sent a prayer over them though I was only steel: May their souls find rest in the garden of Eden, may the merciful one shelter them beneath his wings may they be bound in the bond of eternal life. Amen.

I witnessed food being smuggled to the weakest. I watched people share crumbs as if they were treasures. I saw secret gatherings for uprisings, quiet defense moments where people stood for what was right even when it cost them everything. On one cold fog filled day I heard a prisoner say, "You can imprison our bodies but not our identities." From that moment I no longer believed I was only an object of death, I was also a witness of it. I was still seen as a weapon, a barrier, and a threat but I knew the truth. I've seen humanity endure, I have seen dignity preserved, and I've seen hope persevere. People risked their lives to help others. They defended themselves when they could. They protected their culture, faith, names and their memories. They refused to let the oppressors erase who they were. Even in August 1943, when resistance rose in Treblinka, I felt the air change from fear to courage, and despair to determination.

I was meant to divide but instead, I learned that steel cannot defeat spirit. That hatred cannot destroy love. That even in a place built for death, hope still lives, and though I remain here cold, twisted and misunderstood I will always carry the stories of my inhabitants in my rusted frame. I was not only a barbed wire, I was a witness to persistence,

a witness to resistance, and a witness to hope and joy even through the rough circumstances.

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