

Second Place – Essay/Poetry Division

The Story Behind Our World's Historical Genocide

By Haley Lash

The greatest mass killing in our world's history was preceded by many disturbing events that are sometimes overlooked while explaining to future generations about the horrible scenarios that took place. Many times we do not understand why this malicious man wasn't stopped before his blood trail ran many miles throughout the streets, and his death toll climbed to a reported high of 35 million people altogether. Looking back now, 63 years after the last "prisoner" was taken out of the death traps called concentration camps, we realize the full extent of the horrors and pain each innocent person felt while being locked away for a reason that they couldn't control. Every man, woman, and child is considered a hero just for enduring the anxiety, depression, and fear that came with the lunatic punishment for being a different religion than the Nazis tolerated. Now, as we put ourselves in their places with the controlled food supply, rules, and angry enforcers ready to pounce on any given command, we ask ourselves could we have done more to stop this unforgettable tragedy?

It all started with a man. A man who was expected to accomplish and become nothing, someone who was thought to be kicked out into the streets, and left to work for minimum wage just to get by. However the army he built was set on a foundation of fear and nightmares, whatever people thought could be done, would be done, and Adolf Hitler ran the show. Barking orders, threats, and a whole lot of propaganda, Hitler began to, and then successfully reached the top of the social pyramid, while gaining the trust of others who would help him reach his goal. That goal, (realized while he was sitting in a jail cell for a much less gruesome crime), was that he should rid the world of those who didn't have the hereditary traits of blonde hair and blue eyes. Nobody really knows why Hitler focused on these specific traits, although many beliefs circulate around the reason that he believed that people of these looks and ideas were superior in many ways compared to other people who looked and thought differently. Today we know that thinking this way is horrifying and inhumane, but in the 1940's that specific thought was cast into the minds of many supportive Germans, and the one who put it there was their very own leader.

Adolf Hitler decided that it was time to take action and build what he had been preaching to his followers for months, so in 1933 the first of many "work camps" were set up for anti-Nazis. These camps stated the idea that once you arrived at your supposed destination, the only way to gain freedom was to work until your "debt" was paid off. However, those who at first glance weren't physically strong enough to carry the load of everyday forced labor, were sent right away to the extermination chamber, where they were stripped of their clothing and valuables, and crowded into a room with hundreds of other scared people. Those lucky enough to survive the chambers were taken to a room where gun wielding Nazis stripped them of their clothing, pushed them into severely hot showers with many others, and then shaved their heads in order to control the outbreak of lead lice. After enduring these long and non-consensual actions, striped clothing was thrown at them, and an original number was painfully tattooed onto the inside of their

arm, and from then on you were called by your black number, not your legally given name. From there, they were shown where to sleep, (the men's cabin was separate from the women's cabin) so in that way entire families were broken up and many husbands and wives never saw each other again.

Daily life in the camps was hard and unpromising of a different, more humane lifestyle. Everyday people were given a small ration of thick, stale black bread, a stick of margarine no longer than three pieces of chewing gum, and a small cup of soup that was usually cold, and had "something" floating in it. Most often a person would become too tired and worn out to perform all of what the Nazis guards asked, so they were drug out of their "homes" kicking and screaming, where they were disposed of into the infamous incinerator. Whenever the first big cloud of ashes was shot up into the air, panic struck the other prisoners because with every person thrown into the flames, was another forgotten soul and nameless cloud of dust. If we would have done more, these people wouldn't have been exterminated like an unwanted nuisance, and *if* we would have done more, how many lives would we have saved?