

Mina Rosner Essay Competition

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Unlearned Lessons

The Shoa, also known as the Holocaust, was a mass genocide that took place from 1933 to 1945 when Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Regime massacred six million European Jews. It is important to recognize that due to the horrifying events and hatred that took place in the Shoa, it was rarely spoken of publicly until the 1960s. This occurrence in history marks one of the most disturbing, violent and inhumane acts of genocide and violates the basic fundamentals of human rights. Many of the lessons that we can take from the Shoa hold great importance when looking at how the Shoa impacts society today, how powerful and meaningful the lasting effects are and also lays out expectations as to how we should conduct ourselves today. The Shoa resonates dramatically in our past, present and future in many different ways.

When looking at the time period in history before the Shoa, it is proven that acts of anti-Semitism towards the Jews had already begun. In 1894, a Jewish officer in the French army named Captain Alfred Dreyfus was accused of treason, a charge that was endorsed by the anti-Semitic society of the day. Theodor Herzl, who was born in Budapest, Hungary, was a leading voice in modern Zionism. He witnessed people on the streets of France chanting "Death to the Jews" in response to the charges against Dreyfus. Herzl came to the conclusion that due to these anti-Semitic actions towards the Jews, a state was needed that the Jews would immigrate to and be able to call their own. The State of Israel that Herzl envisioned had a main purpose, that being to serve as a Jewish state where the Jews were able to seek peace, live in a secular community, and experience living in an enlightened society while escaping anti-Semitism. The Dreyfus Affair, as it came to be known, was therefore a factor in establishing the ideology behind

political Zionism. The Dreyfus Affair is one example of many hateful incidents targeted towards Jews. We learn from this occurrence in history that the actions of one person's perceived (and, in the case of Dreyfus, fabricated) wrong doings can lead to the blame and hatred towards a community or, in this case, a nation as a whole. The blame that the Jews faced for the alleged treason of Dreyfus resulted in lashing out at the Jews as a whole. In one perspective, it is safe to say that the early anti-Semitic views and attacks against the Jews may have foreshadowed the Shoa. This case demonstrates how European society was taking shape, even before the Nazis came to power. Theodor Herzl brings up the idea that anti-Semitism was a natural feature of life and that it was to be accepted. By Herzl, it was seen to be an aspect of living with other groups of people and that to address this reality, he believed in the creation of a Jewish state. Like Dreyfus was discriminated against as an individual and Jews were persecuted as a people, today we see frightening hints that humanity has not yet learned the lessons of tolerance and peace. While, thankfully, we have not seen the horrors of the Shoa repeated, we do see some of the conditions that led to the tragedies World War II.

Today throughout the world, there are numerous incidents and people being singled out for poor treatment based on their race, religion, sexual orientation or ethnicity. Nothing has ever equaled the Shoa – and hopefully never will – however, in society today, hateful discrimination and the language and symbols of discrimination bring back uncomfortable similarities of the Shoa in present day. Taking the example of residential schools in Canada in the 1800-1900s, we see that early on the idea of wiping out a culture began. The First Nations in Canada were singled out as a group based on the belief that their culture and lifestyle were inferior. The method they used to diminish this

people and take away their cultures and lifestyles was administering compulsory residential schools. Children belonging to First Nation’s families were taken away from their homes at a young age and were forced to forget their language and essentially were not allowed to practice their culture. Children were forced to assimilate into Canadian culture leaving a lasting effect on the First Nations community as a whole. In fact, some refer to the time of residential schools as a “cultural holocaust”. Our First Nations in Canada still feel the effects today of this dark time in their community’s history. This is one of the examples of suspicion and hatred towards an innocent group of people.

Another example that resembles a major aspect to the Shoa relates to the symbol of the yellow stars that the Jews were forced to wear as well as the numbers that were tattooed onto their arms. By giving each Jew a number, it shows that their name and human identity were not important but rather a number that does not represent any meaning or value to define them. A similar case is present in today’s political environment. In the United States, the political figure Donald Trump, expresses many opinions about Muslims. Trump, who is running for President of the United States, has stated that he does not want to allow Muslims to immigrate or travel to the country. Along with this outrageous idea, he has stated that he wants to require all Muslims to register, meaning that their names would be registered into a system, and would have a special identification – a policy similar to the yellow Star of David. Not only is this an unspeakable act that can be seen as dehumanization, but it also is reminiscent of the Shoa in the sense that a religion is being singled out based on their differences. In fact, a report in the *Atlantic* talks about how during an interview with Trump, the reporter asked him ‘how such a system would be different from Nazi Germany mandating the registration of

Jews?' Trump, who is in a position of influencing the public, is compared by many to Adolf Hitler. The discrimination expressed by Trump has brought very frightening ideas and opinions to the public sphere. These two are just some of the cases that resemble genocide however there are many more events that resemble bits and pieces of the Shoa such as the ISIS terrorist attacks, the Syrian refugee crisis, uprisings in many countries, and others. Something to take away from these inhumane acts of discrimination is that as much as there is to unify people, there is still much that divides people. Something that these cases have in common is that the differences of each race or religion are seen as negative differences and are not respected as they should be. The aspects that make up this hatred of differences are fear, suspicion, stereotypes, as well as the general hatred towards people. While division and hatred still persist, there have also been promising signs that future generations might have the ability to make an impact on the general idea of human rights of people.

The long-term effects of the Shoa in general are not usually positive effects, however the lessons learned from the Shoa by survivors, children of survivors as well as people in general is something to grasp on to and carry forth through generations and can often be seen as positive. As a Jewish teen growing up, I have been highly educated on the Shoa through various events. From learning in school, to visiting museums, to partaking in interviews with local survivors, I feel that I have been impacted by the information that has been opened up and taught to me. I am confident in saying that learning about the Shoa and hearing first-hand accounts of personal experiences, I feel that my Jewish learning and Jewish identity has been enhanced. As a Jew, I feel that it is my responsibility to educate future generations about the Shoa and ensure that the

awareness and stories of the Shoa are never forgotten. Through social media or face-to-face, it is extremely important that the message and the suffering of the Jewish nation during the time of the Shoa is heard. Because of my experience, I feel that my sensitivity to racism and hatred is present and sincere. It is important that racism and anti-Semitism are shunned, because no one deserves to be harmed because of their race, religion, sexual orientation or ethnicity. It is important to recognize that after the Shoa, in 1948 the Declaration of Human Rights was created. The document was a symbol of our society's eagerness to accomplish a lasting change. It showed that the faith in humans did not shed and that one step forward towards the ideal humanity of a society was established.

The effects that the Shoa has on our society today are something that we should forever acknowledge. Genocide is an unimaginable thought process however, in our society today there are many cases that do resemble elements of the Shoa, that are quite enraging. It is important that we must put a stop to acts of racism that have been going on for many years. The thought of living in a perfect world is something that I along with many others strive to live in, however in order to accomplish this, history must never repeat itself. By educating youth about the Shoa, and allowing people to become influenced by the past, we move one step closer to restoring faith in humanity. Although we have suffered as a global community, we must work together to not perpetrate similar crimes. The Shoa was a watershed event in the development of how civilization looks at the ideas of human rights and discrimination. The events, life lessons and impacts resulting from the Shoa are things that should never be forgotten.