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*What Can I Do?*

“But because of the quota, there was only room for one of the families... what can I do for you, honey, would you like more toast or something?”

I blink and look down at my plate, on which sits my forgotten lunch. “No, I’m fine! Keep going, what happened next?”

My grandmother continues her story as I listen on the edge of my chair. Her family knew, in 1938 Vienna, that they needed to get out. But her widowed mother Rosl was Polish, which was the worst quota to be on and made escaping to America impossible. In a breathtakingly lucky encounter, however, Rosl’s brother mentioned to a British couple on a train that his family was Jewish and stuck in Vienna. At enormous personal risk, the woman told him, “If you ever need help, let me know what I can do.” She vouched for Rosl’s family on August 4th, 1938, and by August 8th they had left. My grandmother and her family remained in England until 1940, repeatedly trying for a visa – and finally were able to leave for America, less than two months before the London Blitz, when the Nazis bombed London for 57 consecutive nights (Richards, 1953).

I had the great opportunity this past autumn to eat lunch regularly with my grandmother, during which I asked about her courtship with my grandfather, her young adulthood, and of course, the story of her escape from Vienna. The drama and tension of her story brought home

the reality of the Holocaust in a whole new way for me. Listening to her added an infinite amount of small, personal stories like hers to the large-scale stories we learned about in school. Suddenly every one of the six million had a story for me, each as important as the last, each with infinite consequences and emotions. I asked, asked, asked, and she answered, and asked if I wanted more food.

Asking is Judaism's legacy. Our religion revolves around curiosity and the search for knowledge. We are charged with studying the Torah, and with that commandment comes a tradition of questioning and learning. The core of our faith is discussion, and questioning viewpoints, and evaluating ideas in regards to our own values – as the saying goes, “Two Jews, three opinions.” We seldom accept a statement as fact, but rather debate and question it. This tradition led to, and is continued by, the Talmud – the greatest collection of differing opinions. And our custom of questioning rings especially true as we approach Passover, and the perennial asking of “Ma Nishtana.”

The Holocaust is the most horrific example of what happens when people don't question what's going on around them. Too few people questioned the Nazis' actions to be able to halt them in their tracks. The U.S. as a whole, largely because of government reluctance to intervene, remained passive through the course of the war for far too long; most of its citizens failed to ask what was happening, and what they could do. And the Nazis' maliciousness stems mainly from their inability to listen to opinions other than their own, and to question their own validity – an element at the core of the Talmud, and thus, Judaism as a whole.

Of course, heroes emerged – like Oscar Schindler, who began as an industrialist from Moravia, but questioned the Nazi values, and ended up trading “every bit of money still left in

his possession ... to bribe the many SS investigators” (Steinhouse, 1994). Or the Danish Resistance Movement, who ensured that 99% of Danish Jewry would survive the Holocaust (Dawidowicz, 1986). Or people like those who vouched for my grandmother’s family, and with their selfless actions saved countless souls. All these people began with simple questions: Do I know what’s happening? Do I approve of it? What can I do to change things?

For this reason, we must continue to pass the remembrance of the Holocaust to new generations. The Holocaust reminds us, in the most tragic way imaginable, of the consequences of remaining silent and passive. The Arab Spring testifies to the enduring power of questioning: millions of those under repressive dictatorships refused to stay passive, and they changed their lives and an infinite amount of lives after them for the better. The situation in Ukraine serves as an even more current reminder: the pro-European citizens questioned Viktor Yanukovich’s compliance with Russia, and decided to face strife and possible death instead of giving in to Communist Russia (BBC, Feb. 2014). While the conflict is not yet resolved, the very fact that ordinary citizens can make their voices heard and begin to change things is a testament to the power of the question.

The Holocaust reminds us of the power of an open and compassionate mind, and the importance of asking, “What can I do?” That’s my reason for remembering – but I’d love to hear yours.