

The Remembrance, History, and Lessons of the Holocaust

I was in third grade when I first learned about the Holocaust. I, along with three other students from my class, embarked on reading one of our first challenging chapter books. At the young age of eight or nine, I was very excited to be tackling some more advanced literature. I had no idea that such a book would open a world to me that I had never known. The book was *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry. I recall my teacher telling us that though the story was fiction, the history was real and that we were learning about a difficult part of our past.

My education about the Holocaust did not stop in third grade. Although I had no relatives or family friends who shared personal stories of the Holocaust, I felt an obligation to learn more about the individuals and groups who were so brutally treated. As I continued my education, I found myself continually turning to the Holocaust. As years passed, my research became more extensive and complex. Each book taught me a new story and a new lesson. The stories of the Holocaust never ceased to produce shock. I could not wrap my head around the cruelty that millions experienced. I wanted to begin talking with someone who could tell me their personal story and try to understand how all this happened.

Sometimes the most influential people in your life are, at first, strangers. In 2012, I began reaching out to an eighty-two-year-old woman living in Maryland. We had never met and we led very different lives. The two of us, so contrasting in experiences and age, established a meaningful connection. The woman worked at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Her name was Johanna Neumann. Born in Germany in 1930, and being Jewish, she faced an adolescence full of fear and discrimination. Though her childhood was years past, the memories were vivid and painful to recount. Yet she told her stories so that they would be reflected upon, in hopes that history would never repeat itself in such a way again. Despite Johanna being a stranger, I wanted

to know more, and so our relationship began. I listened to her story.

After numerous projects on specific events during the Holocaust and World War II, I took a different approach for my next undertaking in eighth grade. I was creating a website for the National History Day competition. The reality of Holocaust denial, and the upsetting truth that denial is still prevalent today, became the subject of my research. To me it was, and still is, totally incomprehensible how people could deny the genocide of millions. This revelation truly scared me, as I am a firm believer we must learn from history in order to grow. Since I had been in contact with Johanna as a friend, I asked her to be interviewed for my website on Holocaust denial that was entitled "Folks, It's a Hoax." She gave me answers to anything that I asked her about, and she provided insight into the grappling fear and injustice that she experienced as a Jewish child during the Holocaust.

I was fortunate to place first in my category for the Maine History Day competition. This gave me the opportunity to travel to the University of Maryland to compete in the national competition. This experience is something that is very special to me. While not placing in the national competition, I had the amazing opportunity to teach many of my classmates, peers, competitors, and even teachers and adults about the aspect of Holocaust denial that is not often recognized and discussed.

Johanna passed away on April 26, 2017. Though she is no longer here, her influence lives on. Johanna reached out to many, ensuring that all generations were informed of the atrocities of the Holocaust. She spoke to me about the unrelenting fear she experienced as a child refugee fleeing Germany. In my history and social justice classes, and while listening to the news, I think of Johanna. It is unsettling to witness similar behaviors repeating themselves with the violence

and rage fueled by neo-Nazis and white supremacists today. These atrocities further validate the need in our society for individuals to become educated about the lessons that can be learned from the Holocaust. Sadly other global situations exist today in places such as Myanmar and Syria where a large group of people are deliberately killed because of their ethnicity or religion.

Johanna's story does hold several elements of hope. Johanna and her Jewish family were offered shelter and protection during the Holocaust by the kindness of several Muslim families in Albania. These families exhibited amazing courage by taking such personal risks to their own safety. Although Johanna could have easily withdrawn and opted to never share her painful experiences she courageously confronted the chilling truths of the Holocaust and volunteered to work at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. She took the time to correspond with me through cards and letters on several occasions over the years.

While some can cite a specific event as life-changing, my experience has come in the form of a relationship and intellectual journey spanning several years. My studies of the Holocaust and my relationship with Johanna have encouraged me to have a more socially-conscious view of our world. Currently I participate in a volunteer internship with New Hope for Children, an international and domestic adoption agency, where some of the potential adoptees may also be trying to escape similar feelings of fear, isolation, and uncertainty.

Johanna inspired me to appreciate history and to address injustice. Her story caught my attention and she entered my heart. Though at first she was a stranger, she greatly influenced my thinking and views of the world. For all that Johanna Neumann shared with me, I will always be grateful.

Though Johanna can no longer share her story in person, she left an invaluable gift to all with whom she communicated. By sharing her story to youth and adults, she ensured that her story would live on. As a friend of Johanna's, I feel a duty to pass on her life story. Collectively as the world, we can not let the histories of millions of individuals be forgotten. Each generation must learn of the atrocities that the world witnessed through the Holocaust. In order to ensure that nothing similar ever happens again, we must reflect upon all the lives that were lost. It is up to us to remember and react by focusing on the need to thoughtfully and openly educate others about the sanctity of the lives of all people in our world, regardless of their religious beliefs or ethnicity.

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