

First Prize Prose, Middle School Division

Changed in a Moment

Annie Pankowski

Eighth Grade

St. Anne School, Laguna Niguel

Survivor Testimony: Sophie Weinstein

Identity. Who we are, our “identity” is shaped by life experiences. After watching Sophie Weinstein’s testimony, I have become aware of how reality can change in a moment. Events, such as a war or genocide, can shatter the identity of a whole generation. Where different beliefs, religions, and races are not tolerated, we are not safe to be who we are. Awareness of these tragedies helps us avoid repeating another Holocaust.

Before the war began in Poland in 1939, Sophie was a happy Jewish 17-year-old. Her life was filled with a loving family, supportive friends, and a drive for education. She was ready to start college until everything she saw, felt, and heard shattered who she was. As a young adult in the Warsaw ghetto, she lost the naïve illusion of safety as her family and friends vanished, murdered one by one. All alone in Majdanek, Sophie lost her extroverted, happy personality and the once carefree social girl was transformed into a quiet and wary adult.

The war caused Sophie to lose many aspects of her personality. Witnessing the brutal actions of the Nazis, such as forcing Jews to jump to their death or be shot, Sophie experienced hate and prejudice daily. With no one to lean on, Sophie realized she must take responsibility for her own safety. In Auschwitz, when her survival depended on being selected for work details, she was sick with typhus. Realizing she was the only one of her bunkmates not chosen, and acting on instinct, she risked being shot and ran to join

the group of selected workers. Taking that risk changed her life. The cruel events that she experienced during the war prevented Sophie from emotionally connecting to others, forcing her to see the worst of humanity.

Sophie's story has given me personal awareness of human suffering and the loss millions endured because of religious and racial intolerance.

Safety. I developed a sense of how fragile safety is. Sophie and many others who were persecuted during the war lost their entire lives in a matter of days. Tolerance. It is important to respect and tolerate everyone no matter what they believe in, what color their skin is, or whatever else separates them from the group. Awareness. Being aware of world events means watching the news or reading the newspaper and understanding how those events could impact your life. Intolerance and lack of awareness cost the lives of millions of people during the Holocaust.

Just like Sophie's identity was shaped by the unspeakable acts of the Holocaust, my identity has been changed by hearing her story. Now I understand the danger of misguided beliefs and recognize how quickly life can change when we cannot tolerate the different identities in our world. I am more aware of how intolerance jeopardizes the safety to form one's identity. Awareness. Tolerance. Safety. We all expect these in our lives, but how can they exist until we truly value each and every identity?