

First Prize Prose, High School Division

Intertwined

Case Takata, 10th Grade

Orange County High School of the Arts, Santa Ana

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Survivor Testimony: Leon Leyson

History repeats itself. Will man continue to be cruel to our fellow man, or create a new and better world? Holocaust survivor Leon Leyson experienced unspeakable intolerance at the hands of the Nazis. At the same time, half a world away, another person experienced intolerance in a country where freedom and democracy are the rallying cry.

In 1939, the Germans invaded Poland and 10-year-old Leon found himself first in the Krakow ghetto, then in the forced labor camp named Plaszow. Leyson spoke about how close he was to his mother and how knowing she was near gave him reassurance and strength. At every opportunity, he tried to see her in the camp despite the danger.

Oskar Schindler provided work for Leon and his family and helped protect them by transferring them to his list of people needed for important jobs in his factory as well as moving them to his own camp nearby, and later to his new factory in Brunnlitz, Czechoslovakia. Schindler gave shelter and food to his Jewish workers, directly saving 1200 lives. As a parting kindness, Schindler directed that bolts of cloth and bottles of vodka were to be given to each person. On May 8, 1945, shortly before liberation, this was a gift Schindler did not have to give; he had already done so much. All the Leysons had when they were liberated were their clothes. Leon Leyson recalled, "There were five bottles of vodka and five bolts of cloth... It was such a prescient thing to do... To be able to foresee that these people... we – we had nothing... We could barter; we could trade it for anything. It was better than money." Leon was able to exchange his worn clothes for new navy blue pants made from the fabric.

At the same time, an ocean away, a shivering little girl stood in front of a barbed wire fence and guard tower in the middle of winter. She was handed an oversized U.S. Navy pea coat by a guard. This little girl was thinking of her mother too, who did not receive a coat. My grandmother was 13-years-old when she was forced from her home in California and sent to an internment camp in Arkansas. She and some 120,000 other Japanese Americans were sent to these camps during World War II following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. She was a U.S. citizen behind the barbed wire, guarded by machine guns.

Both Leon and I received our bolts of cloth. For me, it is my grandmother's pea coat. The coat, which by the way is navy blue, and my grandmother, are now over eighty years old. I wear the coat often. I am wearing it now. The Leyson's cloth symbolized hope and one man's humanity in a time of inhumanity. My grandmother's coat symbolizes the intolerance of the U.S. then and the directive for a responsible future passed to me, her grandson. These memories speak of the suffering of people of all races, and of all religions, particularly children. We must all remember.