

Finding A Voice
Katherine McPhie, Grade 10
University High School, Irvine, CA
Teacher: Judy Richonne
Survivor Testimony: Kurt Messerschmidt

Kurt Messerschmidt was 23 when he first witnessed the brutality of the Nazi regime in Berlin. Two Nazi guards, having just broken the storefront of an elderly Jewish shopkeeper, were forcing the man to stoop down and pick up the jagged shards barehanded. Kurt, who bent down and began helping the man, later recalled that “some of the people there disapproved of what the Nazis did, but their disapproval was only silence. And silence is what did the harm.”

Years later, Kurt, who went on to survive numerous concentration camps and a death march, found himself at Terezin, where trains carted away fellow prisoners daily and returned with only their postcards. The ostensible purpose of these postcards was to encourage others to follow them, as they included descriptions of how beautiful everything was where the departed prisoners had gone. What the postcard recipients discovered, however, was that the postcards also contained hidden messages, encoded in every seventh letter, and then every sixth letter, and so on. When deciphered, the postcards were explicit warnings not to believe the stories of the captors because a ride in those train carts meant imminent death. The prisoners from Terezin—even as their own lives were in danger—had spoken out in clandestine urgency to help those who remained behind. They were the opposite of the onlookers in Berlin who had remained silent.

After Terezin and Auschwitz, Kurt found himself in the sub-camp Gollerschau, answering to a deeply-disturbed kapo who was a former professional criminal. After some time, Kurt began to observe a pattern in this kapo’s behavior. After a period of relative calm, the kapo would become visibly agitated, his eyes exhibiting “an irritable flicker.” Invariably, these episodes would end with him lashing out and shooting someone. This would serve to placate the kapo for some time, but eventually the irritable flicker would return and the cycle would repeat. Once when Kurt observed the kapo’s rising agitation he felt a sudden prompting to hum. This contradicted all instincts for self-preservation as Kurt would be drawing attention to himself at a perilous moment, but Kurt chose to be like the brave prisoners from Terezin, not the silent onlookers from Berlin, and began to hum. The kapo passed by at first, but then stopped and returned to Kurt. Kurt continued to hum. Then the kapo did something improbable and marvelous. He directed everyone to gather around the meager one-coal fire and listen to Kurt sing. After that, whenever a period of peaceful monotony seemed to threaten another violent episode from the kapo, Kurt would get the feeling that it was time for him to sing. He said, “And sure enough, at least four times a week or so [the kapo] called a big break for everybody in order to listen to me.” Referring to his singing, Kurt later said, “I had the marvelous feeling that I was doing, with my voice, something very unusual. I was actually saving lives.” Kurt compared himself to “young little David who played for King Saul when he was plagued by evil spirits.” When Kurt used his voice to soothe the possessed kapo, he undoubtedly saved many fellow prisoners who would otherwise have been the victims of the kapo’s unchecked killing sprees.

We who have heard the testimonies of Holocaust survivors like Kurt are now messengers of their memories, and are therefore called upon to use our power of communication and expression to tell those stories. Many lives were destroyed and many were shattered by the persecution and destructive ideas of the Holocaust. There is no way that we can put them back together, or reverse the terrible things that happened. But neither do we need to stand by, silent, and watch as others pick up the pieces alone. We can help them and honor them by not only remembering them ourselves, but by using our voices to share their memories with others. By giving voice to their stories, we can ensure that the atrocities of the Holocaust are never forgotten and never repeated. Like Kurt, we can use our voices to actually save lives.