

Timekeeper
Madeline Gillette, Grade 11
Ankeny Centennial High School, Ankeny, IA
Teacher: Teresa Lawler
Survivor Testimony: Richard Billauer

He was a watchmaker, my father. An admirable profession. There is never a shortage of clientele because one thing unites all people - time. We all depend on it. To wake up, to fall asleep, to get to meetings, shows, parties, funerals. I suppose that before someone had the idea to invent time, everything was chaos. Invent. Does this boggle your mind like it did mine? Time is, of course, a human construct. Humans need structure, humans need things to be predictable. The universe doesn't. So humans had to make it. And my father had to fix it.

He was incredible at his job. His paychecks proved that. Although we weren't overly wealthy, we were comfortable. I went to a private school, where people often knew me as "Julian's boy." I miss that. Both Jews and Gentiles went there, and I found friends in both. It changed as years passed. By 1936, my Jewish friends and I shared a stronger bond. I wouldn't say my fellow students were anti-Semitic, but with the current political climate, no one could be quite sure. I suppose what I was afraid of was the normalizing of anti-Jewish sentiment; that they would no longer feel remorse for their hateful thoughts. So, a natural gravitation occurred.

My childhood quietly progressed. Time passed quickly, but I was happy.

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. This is the day the war began. I figured it would keep its distance. This was surely a conflict between governments, not the governed.

On September 3, 1939, my home was bombed. This is the day the war became real.

The gears in my father's mind immediately began to turn. You could see in his eyes that he knew more than most of us would admit. He knew our time was running out. How lovely that he was a watchmaker - time, after all, was something he could control. And so, in that very same year, he gifted some to me.

At his order, I, Richard Billauer, a fourteen-year-old child, was to leave Warsaw, my home, and board a horse and buggy en route to Bialystok.

He gave me a box of wristwatches, before I left. This, along with clothes and spare change, was all I brought with me. I remained in Russia, unharmed for the rest of the war.

Sometimes I feel selfish. I was, according to history, a "lucky one." Does survivor's guilt apply when both my brother and father survived? I suppose it does. Auschwitz made my father so acquainted with death that a part of him died with the others. And the scars it left on my brother, my eight year old brother, ran so deep that I doubt they will ever heal.

I did, of course, do my share of suffering in Russia. I worked twelve hours a day, every day, in the labor camps I was sent to. I had the benefit of never fearing for my life. Time, though, became a lost concept. I sold all of my father's watches to support myself, and with that went the last indication of the earth turning around the sun. How could I ponder such large, trivial topics when I had dinner to worry about? Weeks turned into months, and months to years; it all blended together. I didn't notice. Suddenly, the war was over. Liberation.

I took a train to Warsaw, then to Lubeck, Germany. This is where I found my father.

His eyes were different, the first time I saw them. Deeper. Cloudier. Heavier.

He acted the same. He bought a new jewelry store, started to rebuild his life. I initially thought this was a sign of progress, of acceptance. I now see he was trying to reverse time.

Even the greatest watchmaker can't do that.

I live in America now. Eyes here are shallow. They look at me blankly as they speak. And the things some say! *Gas chambers, that's a myth. You know, the Final Solution didn't include murder, just deportation. Actually, less than a million died.* Sometimes, I wish they were right.

I check the time. It is my turn to speak.