

Chapman University and The "1939" Club,
Including Shoah Survivors of Orange County and Long Beach

Third Annual Holocaust Writing Contest

Witnesses to Humanity: Choices of Courage

Background for Writing Prompt:

History is the result of choices made by people at a particular time. The Holocaust occurred because individuals, groups, and nations made choices to act or not to act.

Those individuals and groups targeted by the Nazis and their collaborators were confronted with choices that could at times mean life or death. Those individuals and groups who were not targeted also faced choices. In some cases, they could choose to remain bystanders or could choose to help the oppressed, becoming rescuers or resisters.

In the dark days of the Holocaust, many people made choices of courage. Diplomats, sometimes disobeying orders from their governments, issued visas to desperate refugees. Ordinary people helped those in need by offering them food and sanctuary. These acts of human kindness could result in death for them, their families, and even their community. In the United States, far away from the terror, some individuals and groups chose to reach out as rescuers to those in need.

Those who were persecuted often faced grave challenges and made choices of courage. In the ghettos and camps, simply struggling to live another day was a choice of courage. Sharing one's meager ration of bread with another hungry person was a choice of courage. Choices of courage took many forms, including both physical and spiritual resistance.

The individuals whose stories are told below are only a few of the many who made choices of courage. Their choices call us to reflect upon our own values and the depth of our commitment to justice and human rights.



Varian Fry



Irene Gut Opdyke



Sempo Sugihara



Tsalig Leyson

Varian Fry was a thirty-two-year old American journalist when he volunteered to go to Marseilles, France, in August 1940, on behalf of the Emergency Rescue Committee, a private relief group. Only a few months before, Germany had defeated France. Fry's assignment was to rescue some 200 well-known anti-Nazi intellectuals who were in danger of being turned over to the Gestapo by the Vichy government. Fry planned to spend three weeks in France, delivering funds and emergency visas to as many refugees as possible. Fry's only knowledge about being a secret agent came from the movies, but his inexperience did not stop him from taking action. Risking his life, Fry spent over a year in Marseilles and rescued some 2,000 people. He is the only American honored as a "Righteous Among the Nations" by Yad Vashem in Israel.

In 1939, Irene Gut was a 17-year-old student nurse in Poland. When her country was invaded by Germany and the Soviet Union, Irene joined the Polish army. She was captured, beaten, and assaulted by Russian soldiers, a terrible experience that might understandably have led her to seek personal safety for the rest of the war. Instead, when she returned from a Russian hospital to Poland, Irene did whatever she could to help those in need, especially Jews. Forced to become the housekeeper to a German major, she secretly hid twelve Jews in the house. Thanks to Irene, all twelve survived. Irene has been honored as a "Righteous Among the Nations" by Yad Vashem.

In the summer of 1940, Sempo Sugihara held the post of Japanese consul in Kovno, Lithuania. There he learned of the terrible acts being committed against Jews by the Nazis. Sugihara chose to do something to help those in need. Ignoring orders from his government and working day and night, he issued many hundreds of hand written Japanese transit visas, allowing at least 1,600 Polish Jewish refugees to flee Lithuania, travel by train across the Soviet Union, and reach safety. After the war, Sugihara was accused of insubordination by his government and was forced to resign from the diplomatic service. He has been honored as a "Righteous Among the Nations" by Yad Vashem.

In Krakow, Poland, seventeen-year-old Tsalig Leyson was among the fortunate few to be protected under Schindler's List, saving him from deportation. Yet, life was dangerous even for those on the List. Raids occurred frequently, and anyone caught without the required work permit—which the Nazis changed constantly—faced immediate deportation. In October 1943, Tsalig and his girlfriend were caught without the required permits. Tsalig was given a chance to save himself when Schindler spotted him on the train and offered to rescue him. But Schindler could not save Tsalig's girlfriend since she was not one of his workers. Tsalig declined Schindler's offer, refusing to let his girlfriend journey alone to an uncertain destination. He died with her in the death camp Belzec.

Writing Prompt:

Choose a persecuted or non-persecuted person from the time of the Holocaust, whether or not in the examples included, who made a choice of courage. After appropriate research, write an essay or poem about the person, his or her choice, and the circumstances surrounding it. How will this person's courageous choice guide you as a responsible citizen in making your own *witness to humanity, choices of courage*?

The following web sites will help you in your research:

<http://www.ushmm.org>

<http://www.yadvashem.org.il>

<http://motlc.wiesenthal.com>

<http://www.gfh.org.il/english>

<http://www.jfr.org/stories/stories.html>

<http://www.holocaustchronicle.org>

Teachers may also wish to consult: <http://www.facinghistory.org>

Writing Contest Criteria:

- Essay or poem must be typed or word processed and must include a cover sheet with student name, grade, school, and teacher name, telephone number and, if available, email address. Essays must include word count and poems must include line count.
- Essays and poems should not mention the student's school.
- Essay must be no more than 1000 words in length.
- Essay may be persuasive, narrative, informative, or a combination thereof, but it must communicate a clear idea and be based on accurate information. Please include at the end of the essay the resource(s) consulted.
- Poem must be no more than 30 lines and must be based on accurate information. Please include at the end of the poem the resource(s) consulted.
- All entries become the property of Chapman University.

Your school's winning essay(s) and/or poem(s) must be **postmarked by January 15, 2002** and mailed to:

Dr. Marilyn Harran
The Rodgers Center for Holocaust Education
Chapman University
One University Drive
Orange, CA 92866

Please visit our web site: <http://www.chapman.edu/holocaust>. You may also contact the Rodgers Center at (714) 628-7377 or Professor Jan Osborn at (714) 628-7221.