

2025 Elie Wiesel Competition

2nd Place Senior Essay

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The Stories that Stay with us Forever: The Difference Between Learning from a First-Person's Experience and Hearing a Person's Interpretation of History

Pondering the difference between learning history from someone's first-hand experience and hearing a person's interpretation of it, I think back to the time I watched Schindler's List. This gut-wrenching and eye-opening movie is a powerful interpretation of history, tying together the stories of victims, survivors, and bystanders into one story, and while watching it, I felt an overwhelming sense of sorrow, anger, and compassion.

Haunting scenes of dread encompass the film, leading up to the one color—red. A scene that will stay with me until this day, the utterly helpless child, wandering through the chaos of the Kraków ghetto, wears a red jacket—the only color amidst a backdrop of black and white horrors. This choice brings her humanity into sharp focus, making her fate feel personal and devastating, affecting me profoundly when the scene cut, and her lifeless body appeared among the piles of corpses. It wasn't just sadness I felt—it was a mix of rage, helplessness, and grief that stayed with me long after the screen went dark.

This re-telling of one of the ghastliest stories in history didn't just show me the horrors of the Holocaust—it made me feel them. Feel for the children. Feel for the parents. Feel for those who suffered and perished without family, without answers, without love. The trembling hands of Jews being stripped of their dignity, the haunting cries of mothers being torn from their children, the terror in the eyes of those standing in line, not knowing if they were walking toward survival or death, forced me to confront the reality of human suffering in a way I had never imagined. This interpretation of history was not just a history lesson; it was a reckoning with my humanity.

With all its raw emotion, Schindler's List showed me horrors I never dreamed of witnessing—even in a movie. Nevertheless, it was not the same as hearing a Holocaust survivor speak. There will always be something about first-hand accounts that tugs at one's heart strings in a way in which second-hand interpretations of stories will not. A first-hand account is not about facts or timelines anymore, it is about the people themselves, their courage, and how they found strength in inconceivable circumstances. You feel their fear as they tell you about the moments they believed that they would not live to see another day, and you cannot help but be moved by their resilience, perseverance, and courage. The emotion which this evokes can never be fully captured in an interpretation of the story, no matter how powerful the film or book.

Because of modern technology, I have been able to listen to survivors recount their histories, and I will never forget the images they painted. In a poignant interview with Sky News, Holocaust survivor Susan Pollack, now 93, recounted the harrowing experiences she endured during her time in Auschwitz. While just a teenager, she and her family were torn away from life as they knew it and transported to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, beginning an unimaginable nightmare. The inhumane conditions, pervasive stench of death, and constant presence of fear ensured that the daily struggle for survival was relentless. Hearing her speak from her own memories evoked emotions which I had never felt—even during the retelling of the Holocaust in Schindler's List. Listening to Mrs. Pollack share her account of witnessing the selection process where children, the elderly, and the sick were led away to

the gas chambers, opened my eyes to the true reality—one moment you are alive, but if your name is scribbled on the wrong list, you aren't.

Watching and listening to a first-person recounting of a story makes you step back and question what you would do in the same situation. What would I do? I could only hope to have the same courage, perseverance, and faith as Mrs. Pollack.

In first-person accounts, the story changes. It is no longer a story. It is someone's life.

These accounts of history—whether they be second-hand re-telling, or a first-hand account—are vital. Second-hand accounts piece together stories, like a puzzle, and help the audience see the connections. With these interpretations, histories of the Holocaust will never be repeated in the future because people will better understand all the causes, effects, and connections. President Eisenhower understood this, ordering photographers to document the horrors of the camps. Realizing the pictures, as well as first-person accounts would connect individual suffering to the truth, he collected the stories of those who suffered and lived through the abominations which we now know as the Holocaust.

First-hand accounts of history make us feel. They allow us to view the human side of history. Second-hand accounts help us connect the dots. Both are vital to understanding the lives of our ancestors and those who lived before us. However, it is the personal stories—the trembling voices, the tears, the deep memories of those who lived through history—that stay with us forever.