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Holding On To History

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Abstract

When I searched for the story of Georges Lieber, the very man whose drive to resist inspired the concept for this essay, I could not find it. The only trace of him was his record on the Yad Vashem database which merely states that he was a student and that he was transported from Lyon, France to Auschwitz in 1944. His story, along with much of Holocaust history, remains unknown or misunderstood for many people, both from my generation and those before us. As a long-term student of history and an aspiring educator, I have chosen to resist the sliding grip that people have on history and hoist it up before the lives and lessons in it are lost.

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

Second place winner of the 2020 Georges Lieber Essay Contest on Resistance.

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When I searched for the story of Georges Lieber, the very man whose drive to resist inspired the concept for this essay, I could not find it. The only trace of him was his record on the Yad Vashem database which merely states that he was a student and that he was transported from Lyon, France to Auschwitz in 1944. His story, along with much of Holocaust history, remains unknown or misunderstood for many people, both from my generation and those before us. As a long-term student of history and an aspiring educator, I have chosen to resist the sliding grip that people have on history and hoist it up before the lives and lessons in it are lost.

It is fairly clear to me why so many people do the exact opposite of this and resist learning about the most shameful periods of history. The slow release and eventual forgetting of people's stories is something much larger than neglect; there is something innately human about it. We are rarely willing to talk about the things in our lives which bring us the most pain, so it should come as no surprise that we are so reluctant to talk about the most painful chapters of history. For instance, I remember my step-grandmother sitting down with me at a Christmas party when I was in the fifth grade and had just finished reading Anne Frank's diary. She asked me with total sincerity, "How can you bear to read things like that? Don't they make you sad?" The answer is easy enough to guess and one that I have had to repeat many times since then: yes, of course. I have always had a very sensitive nature and am fairly sure that I am incapable of desensitizing myself to studying this subject, but why would I want to? Feeling that pain and revulsion reminds me that I am human just like the people whose stories I study, and allows me to form the same connection between myself and them as we can form amongst ourselves if we are willing to talk about the things which we find challenging. Speaking your own truth is extremely daunting and so is feeling obligated to tell others truths in a way that honors them, but

if few others are willing to face Holocaust victims' stories, then I will do it. They have received far too many turned cheeks in their lifetimes for me to turn away from them now.

However, human nature is considerably hard to resist, so it is the other reason that we lose connection with history that I am aiming to aid, education. The education system has always been lacking in its methods of bringing history to the young and the perpetually bored. In my own experience, educators will either go too far and scare off the few who might be interested, or drastically not far enough and horrify those of us who study it ourselves. My education on the Holocaust during high school has consisted of being shown textbook definitions on a projector, watching *Schindler's List*, and filling out a packet. That was it, class dismissed. In the week that we were watching the movie, I got to help a lot of people answer the assigned questions about it. I say "got to" because to me, this was a fulfilling week. Not because I was required to watch a topic I knew from years of reading and watching random documentaries to be full of life be turned into something I couldn't recognize, but because I had an opportunity to breathe some of that life back into it for others for the first time. I loved when people would come to me for help because they typically wound up wanting to know the answers rather than solely wanting a decent grade. I loved that I was finally getting to share some of the stories I had been keeping all to myself with others for them to love too. And, in the true spirit of resistance, I loved defying the normal way people are taught to view history by offering up the best stories of rebellion, human decency, and teenage-like humor that I could think of. That week ended quickly, but my longing to share those stories has only grown in the year that has passed since then.

Not every student will have the same experience, of course, and there are some very passionate teachers out there fighting the good fight, but unfortunately, my experience is not uncommon. Almost everyone I've ever spoken to has said that history was their least favorite

subject in school and are immediately apologetic about this because they know it's one of my favorites. I always stop them after their "sorry, it's just not my thing" speech to assure them that I understand where they are coming from. They are coming from classrooms like mine where history was reduced down to, well, history. It is a sizable degradation to think of history only as people that lived a long time ago, events that could never happen today, and stories that we could not possibly connect to as modern day teenagers sitting in a classroom in 2020. Students who are never taught to debunk those misconceptions of history have undoubtedly suffered the short end of the history teacher stick. Even if a student's natural interest is not history, an engaging and caring teacher can bring out at least a spark of something beyond tolerance for the subject. Meanwhile, those who do have a deep-rooted love for history will recognize it as the intense, emotional, and sometimes funny topic that they have come to know it as in their own studies. Even I have been swayed into liking math on a few occasions if the teacher I have is kind enough to make it understandable. I imagine this is how it feels to those who struggle with history as well. Dates and names in note packets can look just as outlandish as calculus without somebody there to show you how to use the calculator. But, if the teacher has the patience and passion to bring history to their students in a way that allows them to make simple person-to-person connections with the people whom they are studying in class, then even those students will succeed and those lessons will not be lost.

On the opposite end of the spectrum from my Holocaust education experience are the middle schoolers I started noticing in the 940 section of my school's library this year. Anyone who studies World War II and/or the Holocaust will be familiar with the 940 section and will definitely know that you can usually count on having zero human interactions there, let alone with young people. So, as the easily-excitable history lover that I am, I couldn't help but ask

them whether they needed help picking something to read. Both of them said yes because they had no idea where to start or what to choose. They had been assigned to read a certain number of books on the Holocaust for their class and were then sent out into the wild that is a library's history book selection. Pick the boringly written biography and forever shun the subject, but check out the emotional and immensely personal diary of a victim your age and never be able to ignore it again. It's easy to see where a student can lose their balance on this fine line.

One of the girls came back to me a week later to see if I could find her a second book. I was so overjoyed by the fact that she finished the first book so quickly that I practically floated over to scan the shelves once more. Safe to say I've earned the slightly strange reputation as "that girl who reads about World War II," but also safe to say they are reading some of the best Holocaust books that our school owns right now.

As I have made abundantly clear in my undisguisable excitement, there is some hope to be found in public school's Holocaust education. I have also found, though, that others are struggling with this form of learning, and I do not blame them at all. As much as I enjoy recommending books to the middle schoolers I met a few weeks ago, it is their teacher who should be helping them choose the books they read. It is crucial that they are opening themselves up to people's stories who will resonate with them, not those who they cannot understand or relate to in any way. When they are jumping straight into the deep end of the pool with books like *Night* in the eighth grade, most of them are bound to hop out of the pool before realizing there is a shallow end. I fully admit that I would have done the same in their shoes, and not just because I can't swim. I tried reading *Night* when I was in middle school as well, and even after having studied the Holocaust for a few years, I was not ready for that book. I needed Anne Frank's diary, I needed teenage stories of rebellion, something a young soul could relate to. I

desperately needed to see the human in these stories before they became so bleak that they needed to be stripped of the same qualities that made them feel real to me. I will try very hard to never lose sight of that need because I do believe it is the key to getting more young people involved with learning from history as they go into their futures.

When I was at a Holocaust speaker event a few months ago, this was a recurring topic of discussion. Everyone seemed to agree that Holocaust education was important and that more young people should be aware of what actually happened, but looking around the room, I was one of maybe five young people in that room. While five people is better than none, I still felt relatively disappointed in the education system's ability to engage more than five students in wanting to study a topic so vast and easy to get lost in. The Never Again Education Act was also brought up a few times, and while most people were in agreement that it was a good start towards improving Holocaust education, the reason the bill is not fully endorsing growth is the same reason why there was not more than five young people in that room. The bill is not specific as to how students can best be educated or how much attention should be given to the subject, so there's quite a bit of room for this bill to leave this issue largely untouched. If, someday, I can have a part in either improving that bill which truly does have a good foundation and positive intentions, or become an educator who knows from experience creative ways to engage young people in history, then I would love to do so.

When students are not being educated on something important, the other option is for them to educate themselves. I began to educate myself for myself; it was not a requirement, I had no due date, and in the beginning, I was not thinking about doing it so that I could educate others. I simply took the time to do it because I had an unshakable desire to. I was lucky in that, from the very first book I read, the people who wrote them appeared real and present to me.

Many times I even had dreams where they were speaking to me or hugging me, and I always woke up with the feeling that perhaps they need me just as much as I need them. So many students lose sight of the real importance of history because they cannot or have not been taught how to see that the people who lived it are real people. I'd need every one of my peers' hands to count the times someone has laughed until they cried or had a crush or made friends in the books I've read. These are all normal, mundane things most of us do, yes? We only lose connection with people of the past when we forget that they were, in the human sense, us, just in different circumstances.

Reading Anne Frank's diary and seeing how blatantly normal she was, was all it took to have me reaching for every high library shelf and reading anything I could get my hands on. With my to-be-read list and bookshelves so full, I was no longer alone in teaching myself. The people behind those books became my teachers, and wonderful ones too. Miep Gies taught me that behind every story like Anne Frank's, there were people taking risks every day to provide them with not only food and medicine, but companionship and kindness. Jack and Rochelle Sutin taught me that love sprung up even from the underground hide-outs of resistance fighters, and Sophie Scholl taught me that there is nothing more powerful than speaking the truth when others aren't willing to. Memoirs and diaries started to outshine every textbook on the market, and I began to feel like these people were just on the opposite side of the table from me, and similarly, started to recognize history for what it is: still very much present.

While others were out doing the more traditional teenage activities, I was sitting in my room making lists of books to check out from the library the next time I went. While countless history teachers around the globe were cutting down their Holocaust lesson more and more, I was trying to think of fresh ways that I could share all of the stories I was beginning to retain. I

started to think about all of the other things I enjoy: art, writing, ancestry, and how I could use those interests as tools to get history out of the dusty box it has been placed in. However, I've come to know that those pieces will fall into place. No matter what path I take to sharing people's stories, if I do it with the passion I've grown in all of the years that I've loved these people and for the sole reason that I care about them, it will be a job well done.

When I was brainstorming the ways in which I could bring something different to the already full table of historians, I did stumble upon something major. This stumble came in the form of reading *Branded by the Pink Triangle* by Ken Setterington. I was profoundly disturbed that I had been studying the Holocaust for six years and not yet read a single book about the homosexual victims of the Holocaust, or any non-Jewish Holocaust victims for that matter. The truth of it is that the recognition for the homosexual victims of the Holocaust, as well as the disabled, Romas, Jehovah's Witnesses, Serb, Soviet, and Polish civilians, and political opponents of Nazi Germany, is still up to us to create, and I look forward to being a part of it. I am actively turning away from the tradition of picking and choosing who to give attention to in history and opening my arms to everyone. For homosexual victims and survivors of the Holocaust, there was no compensation or recognition for many years. Paragraph 175, the Nazi law against homosexuality, was not removed until 1969, therefore still branding these men as criminals even after the war was over, and they were not recognized as Holocaust victims until 2001. The reason for this is that homophobia continued, as it had before the war, in all corners of the world, so people were not nearly so willing to listen to their stories. But, the time for ignoring their truths was over before it ever began and I am happy to do whatever I can to provide them with the belated care and recognition that they always deserved.

Though the prompt says that Georges Lieber “prided himself on being part of the French resistance,” one thing I’ve noticed about resisters is that they very rarely feel “prided” or “heroic” for having done whatever brought them that unwanted title. What is seen as resistance is often people acting moral in immoral times, and for those with human decency, doing the moral thing doesn’t seem extraordinary, even if it is not ordinary in their circumstances. Everything I’ve experienced so far has shown me that resistance is far more than fighting something; it is loving it too. Georges Lieber loved his friends, his family, and wanted to restore some love back into his country which desperately needed it. I love the survivors and victims whose stories I’ve come to know and long to see them live on in people’s memories and hearts so that we can, at long last, give them the respect they indubitably earned.

In the act of picking up history where my classes left it behind, I am choosing to listen and help others hear too. I have discovered what it is to be passionate, persistent, and capable of caring for people who I have never even known, and connecting with them despite the time that separates us. I have also been emboldened to speak my own truths upon seeing how much can be learned from the honesty of others. In the last few years, I have been more open about my experiences, even those which make me more than a little hesitant to share, and have become more confident and comfortable with myself because of it.

All of these little ways of warding the grim reaper away from history are important to me. They were important to me when I began, they are vital to me now, and they will be stronger still as I carry them into my future career. I am not sure exactly what path I will take in sharing these stories, but I do know that it is a path which is essential in all of its fragility and pain because in it, there is also hope for a more loving future.