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I Stand Beside You, Then and Now

When I was thirteen, my social studies teacher rushed our buzzing eighth grade class off the field trip bus. Her hand grazed the tops of our heads in rhythm with headcount: “Ruby…Micheal…Lauren…” she mouthed as we filed down the bus steps. There I stood at the front of the Dallas Holocaust Museum, too small to fathom the stories, the terrors, or the souls which awaited me inside. I had never heard the rowdiest boys fall quiet without first being scolded, but somehow, we all knew that silence was our tribute.

I could know of no world without my mother, yet my eyes flew through the stories of children who did. Children who were seized from their humanity, forced to carry the last memory of their own mothers being whipped by leather until they, too, were constrained into boxcars designed for animals. The face of a little boy illustrated the nearby text. A small number, etched onto the cruel gray and white stripes, thieved him of his name. I learned of how men with their own daughters and sons marched him and others to their deaths: “A-111…A-112…A-113…” they shouted as they took headcount of the prisoners. At thirteen, I had a name and my mother’s arms to come home to after school. And in another reality, at thirteen, the little boy in the illustration had no name at all.

I went home that day with the understanding of what hatred truly meant.

Just after turning twenty-one, I enrolled in a community engagement course here at SMU. As part of our coursework, we were expected to visit the Dallas Holocaust Museum and connect the ideas of antisemitism to the disparities and hatred which society endures still frequently. Eight years lingered from the time I was here in my saddle oxfords with my social studies class. And yet, I felt no braver facing the weight of what millions of Jewish families suffered. A certain guilt consumed me as I traced through the museum’s remodeled hallways. How had I gotten so lucky to have escaped such a callous reign? The history of the Holocaust had already embedded itself into the course of time, something you nor I could never change.

Yet, the concepts of advocacy and resilience I’ve been taught in my community engagement class have made me realize that the wounds of history do not have to bleed. I walk through my college campus and notice the diversity, inclusion, and the many voices which speak for those who have none. It is easy to overlook the progress we have made, the hatred we have diffused, and the dictatorship we have dismantled. To those who lost everything and watched their homes be consumed by fire, we live like kings.

Even so, hatred will always lead the lives of some. It is hard for me to believe that antisemitism could exist when the true stories of brutality exist in every textbook, museum, and are applicable as lessons to the problems society endures today. It is troubling to believe that those of the Jewish faith still face the insensitiveness and exclusion of others on campuses which are meant to educate the youth of today. I read once, in the books I used to tear through about antisemitism and the Holocaust, that “while it is lazy and simple to hate, it is challenging and brave to love.” So, I write this, knowing that students still face mockery and antisemitism in a place that is supposed to be their home away from home. I stand beside them through the lessons about being an upstander I have gained in my community engagement class at SMU and through my own personal empathy and knowledge of the Holocaust.