

First Place Award
2018 Ida Kramer Children and the Holocaust Essay Contest
“A Flame of Hope-The Legacy of Dr. Ralph Troll”
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A glimpse of your mother’s panicked face fills your eyes as two large men carry her away, screaming, the door slamming behind them. In an instant, your world is changed.

During the Holocaust, more than 6 million Jews were murdered in cold blood by the Nazis, led by Adolf Hitler. Men, women and children were slaughtered in concentration camps and on the soil of Germany. To some, the force of the Nazis was too great to overcome, and much of the world stood still. One child, however, survived, walking the path of life with courage and faith in his heart from start to finish. This is the story of Dr. Ralph Troll, a Holocaust survivor.

Dr. Troll was born in Germany in 1932 as Hitler was rising in power. Dr. Troll’s extended Jewish family began fearing for their lives as World War II became more of a reality.¹ Some relatives moved to America, some to the Middle East, some to France...anywhere to escape the burning grip of hatred.¹ However, Dr. Troll’s immediate family opted to stay in Germany.¹ His father was Catholic and his mother Jewish, so the trio (Ralph was only six while his sister was not yet born) moved from Darmstadt, Germany to a small, isolated farm in the German countryside near the Rhine River in 1938.¹ There, his family lived a primitive life with no running water or electricity.¹ They were safe from Nazis, but not the march of time. “Good Morning” turned to “Heil Hitler.” Gym class began to resemble basic military training. Being a Nazi was rewarded as Judaism was violently punished. As Ralph grew up, he was denied admission to high school; people believed that a half-Jew was filthy and didn’t deserve an education. These transformations from acceptance to fear continued.

In February of 1945, two brisk knocks hit the wooden door of the small countryside house. Thoughts flashed through Ralph’s mind. Who could it be? What do they want? His parents looked at each other, an animal look of fear in their eyes; they hadn’t expected visitors.

Ralph’s father grimly walked to the door, the frail floor creaking. His shoulders were slumped, his hands balled into fists. His mother’s body was tense, her hairs sticking up.

Creeeaaak. The door opened. The shadows of two large men loomed over Ralph’s father. Darkness covered him and filled his brown eyes. The Gestapo.

The men pushed him down and clodded over to his wife, who was already getting up to run. They caught her by the collar of her shirt and grabbed her thin arms. Her husband, Ralph’s dad, stood up, but the men, he realized, would hurt his wife if he took action. He gave her one last look of deep sadness, intermingled with a passionate love. Resignation.

Slam! The door shut. The screams of Ralph’s mother were the last he heard of her for the next six years.

A government official had exposed Ralph’s family to the Gestapo, upon which his mother was taken by crowded cattle car to a Theresienstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia, where she slept in cramped, small rooms of 16 people on beds infested with insects.³

At age twelve, Ralph lived in darkness of fear but with a ray of hope in his heart. His father worked in his chemistry office until it was destroyed by bombing. The two decided that Ralph’s four-year-old sister needed to move to a new family to be kept safe. The goodbye was full of bittersweet

tears; young Ralph would lose his sister, but at least she would be safe. Ralph and his dad hid in the countryside, hiding and feeding escaped Russian and Polish war prisoners and German War defectors when needed until, one morning, German forces kicked them out of their own property.¹ They lived from house to house until the joyous day that the Americans and their allies officially won World War II and liberated the camps. Ralph tasted the sweetness of candy for the first time, gifted by American forces. His family received a small, ordinary note in the mail. It stated Ralph's mother's name and her location. Soon after, his mother and sister returned to the family; tears of joy dripped from Ralph's eyes. God had answered his prayers.

The family traveled to a German refugee camp and lived there for five months, until they traveled to the United States of America in 1946.¹ He was 14 years old and didn't speak or understand English. He hadn't received a middle or high school education in Germany, so the officials placed him in 5th grade. He quickly advanced up the grades until, in 1948, he graduated to high school.¹

He joined the U.S. armed forces and fought in the Korean War as a parachute rigger and paratrooper for three years, learning about the army that freed his family from the wrath of the Nazis.¹ After the war, when he returned to America, he applied for, and was accepted into, the University of Illinois, where he eventually obtained his bachelor's and master's degrees.² From there, he attended the University of Minnesota where he earned a PhD in Zoology.¹ He had gone from a young, motherless, fearful child in Germany, to a member of the army that saved him, to a college-educated Holocaust survivor in America.

Though the Holocaust is not happening today, there is still an immense amount of prejudice in this world. My sister Sintayehu looks different from my brother and me. She was born in Ethiopia and her skin is milky brown. It pains my heart to feel that the world may mistreat her with harsh words, unjust actions, and prejudice. This pain has turned into an infinite flame of determination to make the world a better place. With my interview of Ralph Troll, I have learned ways to channel that flame into a passionate resolve to change the lives of thousands for the better. I pledge to stand up for oppressed people both in our world and in our minds. I pledge to love all beings no matter who they are, what they look like, or what they believe. I pledge to not be silent when I see injustice in my school and community.

The lessons I learned from Dr. Ralph Troll changed my life. I learned that it is possible to cope with the unexpected and to overcome adversity with hope and love in my heart. Inside, we are all equal, no matter what gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion we have.

"Always be honest, hardworking, and respectful," he stressed during our interview, "and treat others the way you want to be treated. If you see an injustice, speak up immediately; we are all human. Endure and have faith, hope and strength."

Throughout his life, Dr. Ralph Troll always believed in humanity. It is remarkable to me that his love for humans continues despite everything that he endured as a child.

To believe in justice. To believe in equality. To believe in Love. That is what I learned from Dr. Ralph Troll.

Sources

¹“Surviving the Holocaust – Dr. Ralph Troll.” Telephone interview. Friday Jan. 2018.

²“Ralph Troll.” *Ralph Troll/ Augustana College*. Augustana College, n.d. Web. 26 Jan. 2018

³Elliott, Selliott@qconline.com Stephen. “Augie Professor Speaks of Own Holocaust Experience.” *Dispatch-Argus-QCOnline*. ©2017 Lee Enterprises. 26 Apr. 2009. Web. 26 Jan. 2018.