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Kimmelman Contest

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“Auschwitz was hell. The smell of burning flesh from the six crematoria that were working around the clock were so awful that I cannot describe it to you. People were walking skeletons because food was very, very scarce, very little, and yet, we had to work twelve hours daily or twelve hours night shift.” This is just *one* of the many nauseating descriptions that Mira Kimmelman, a holocaust survivor and speaker, gave of what her life was like in one of the five concentration camps she’s suffered through as a young Jewish woman. Although many people shy away from the Holocaust, one of humanities most embarrassing and shameful events, Mira Kimmelman wanted us to know that it is still a part of our history that we cannot erase, and that we should study and learn from it to prevent such a thing from happening again. Along her journey, she showed us how her world views changed, as well as teaching us an important message when it comes to contemporary instances of injustice. It’s best to start from the beginning, and as Mrs. Kimmelman said, “It is not a happy story, it is not a nice story, but it is the truth.”

Mira Kimmelman’s story starts in Danzig, 1923, when she was born. “My childhood, until ten years, was only happy,” she explained. Soon, everything changed. At the age of twelve, she was forced to leave high school for the mere fact of being Jewish. She learned Polish, one of the most difficult languages to learn, just so she could attend a high school that would accept her. The struggles began to increase as antisemitism began to work its way through Mrs. Kimmelman’s life. Every little activity became a new challenge, from having to go through immeasurable efforts to receive an education, to Nazis throwing rocks at Jews who were doing

nothing except walking to pray. Many Jews tried to leave the country as fast as they could, but it was challenging, as not every place would accept them.

When Mrs. Kimmelman was fifteen, her family was ordered to leave their home and to only bring the items that they could carry. This meant having to leave everything behind, valuable possessions and belongings saved up over the years, *gone*. They only brought what could help them survive: heavy jackets, clothes, and boots. Most people today would find that unimaginable, just as Mrs. Kimmelman did, yet the first thing she thought of to bring was her family photos. To her, having family nearby wherever she went was more important than trinkets; those photos were one of the few belongings she carried throughout her time in the Holocaust.

From there, Mrs. Kimmelman and her family were shipped to Warsaw, the capital of Poland, a place with little to no housing, electricity, or water. Luckily, she had an aunt who lived there, who took on the enormous role of housing a total of two families: her own parents, sister, and brother, and Mrs. Kimmelman, her parents, and her brother. It was difficult to live crammed together with few resources in a tiny house, but Mrs. Kimmelman said, "At least we had a roof over our heads.” This was one worldview that changed for her, starting to live through gratitude and look at everything as if it was a gift. Here, she started to truly understand the value of the little things in life, how one should be grateful for what they have and for the very fact of being alive.

The rules in Warsaw were that Jews were prohibited to walk the main streets, use public transportation, and that they must follow a strict curfew. Anyone caught disobeying would be immediately shot. In a speech to Jefferson Junior High-School, Mrs. Kimmelman explains to the children, “The freedom we have here is so tremendous that for you to imagine any other kind of

life is very hard.” And she was correct, the freedom that we possess is something that we all take for granted each and every day. Ask yourself, are you allowed to attend school? Walk the streets of your town? Ride a bus? Live in your *own* house? Answering “yes” means that you already have ten times the freedom that Mira Kimmelman had, and this little freedom is what sparked her appreciation of the things such as the clothes on her back, her shoes, and even her own *roof*.

However, she knew that she couldn’t live like this forever, explaining... "with winter approaching, we knew that we will not survive in Warsaw, because there was no fuel, there was very little coal, the apartments were cold; our clothing was really not fit for a cold, polish winter. There was starvation, and there already started an outbreak of typhoid fever.” Her choice was to either die or take action, and she chose the latter. “Jews have to wear the band with a star of David to be identified as Jews,” Mrs. Kimmelman explained, and knowing that it was prohibited for them to use public transportation with a visible band on, they discarded them. It was a risk that could cost them their lives; to be caught without it was an automatic death penalty. From there, they split up; if only one person was caught there would be less of a chance of the whole family being found and punished. Cold and exhausted, they waited the entire day for the train to arrive, standing in –20 to –30-degree weather. By the time the train approached, it quickly became crowded, leaving no room for Mrs. Kimmelman and her family to board. The next day they did the same task, until they eventually succeeded.

When they reached Tomaszow, they immediately felt foolish for thinking that it was possible to escape their previous living conditions. Upon arrival, they discovered that all Jews, including themselves, were ordered to live in ghettos, which were closed areas of crowded people forced to live in a very small room. It was their everything: their kitchen, living room, and bathroom. Despite this challenge, Mrs. Kimmelman mentioned that “you can live like this, if you are together, and, if you are supportive of each other.” Another world view that changed for

her was the understanding that family was the most important gift, and that life would be heavy without them there to help lift the weight. She realized that with the support of her family, it was attainable to overcome problems that appeared to be impossible.

October, 1947, Mrs. Kimmelman and her family were once again forced to leave their house, sent East to work in Russia to become farm and factory workers. In order to reach the train, they walked through cities, and those who stumbled or were too sick to walk were shot. Some people, like Mrs. Kimmelman, her father, and brother, were quickly pulled out of line. She says, “I did not even have a chance to say goodbye to my mother,” who was one of the people being boarded on the train to Russia. Little did they know that everybody on the train wasn’t being taken to work, but to be killed. This is yet another perspective that changed for Mrs. Kimmelman, one where she learned that the Earth can be a place of dark and horrible discrimination, murder, and fear, and that in order to survive, she would need to live through strength and determination.

Eventually, Mrs. Kimmelman and the rest of her family were sent to Auschwitz, the largest concentration camp during the Holocaust. People were divided between men and women, which meant that Mrs. Kimmelman would be left alone, with nothing but the family photos that she carried. As people lined up, they were directed to go either right, to the gas chambers, or left, to work until they could work no longer. Luckily, Mrs. Kimmelman and her family were directed left, but it still meant that they would have to persevere through treacherous labor. It wasn’t until Mrs. Kimmelman was twenty-one when she was liberated, and by the end, she had learned what gratitude, strength, determination, and family meant in a world of terror.

What is Mira Kimmelman’s message to us? It’s that we shouldn’t judge someone based on what that they can’t control rather than who they are as a person, because it will only lead to

death, violence, and guilt. In one article titled, “Nazi Racism: An Overview,” it states, “Racists believe that innate, inherited characteristics biologically determine human behavior. In the early twentieth-century, such views on race were widely accepted in many parts of the world. In fact,

race is not biologically based, it is a cultural classification of groups.” This classification is the exact thing that Mrs. Kimmelman wanted to prevent in today’s world. Each human being is a different, unique person who has a right to live on earth. As Mrs. Kimmelman puts it, “If you are hated, not for what you are as a human being, but for the color of your hair, or the color of your eyes, or your religion, or your skin, or what your grandmother was, is that fair? This is why it is so dangerous to group people, it is important that we take every human being for what he or she is, never, never grouping people, because if you group people there is a danger, that if you disklike a group, then you are building hatred, and this is the only thing that we want to prevent, we want people to understand, that all human beings are very precious.”

Injustice is persistent, as demonstrated with the ongoing discrimination, stereotyping, and racism that we see in today’s world. With bigotry purely based on skin color, religious beliefs, and ethnicity, it’s crucial for us to learn what Mira Kimmelman has taught us; to never group people, and to never hate them for being themselves. Additionally, we must always use the strength and resilience that she has taught us, not only for those facing discrimination, but for those fighting against it. While the end of discrimination is far away, by following Mira Kimmelman’s message, we can take just a step closer.

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