

Years 7 & 8

2nd Place: Shaylee Heedes

Year 7, Hammond Park Secondary College

The Sound of a Sten

The aromatic smells filled the kitchen, teasing my senses. All was calm and still, until I felt the ground beneath my feet begin to rumble. A creature deep within the crevices of the earth beginning to awaken from its deep slumber. An engine whirring overhead beckoned me to come outside. Unable to resist, I followed the urge and peered out my window. But unlike the welcoming feeling inside the small cottage belonging to my mother and me, what I see is not half as pleasant.

Hundreds of planes smothered the sky, dropping round capsule-like objects. When I heard an explosion in the distance, I realised that the mystery items were bombs. An aircraft directly above me opened its hatch, and all I could possibly do was run.

Almost out of reach from the explosion, I heard a voice above all gunshots. A voice that I knew too well. A voice that was too familiar to ignore. Spinning on my heel, I saw my mother running towards me. My heart stopped as I saw a German soldier lift his gun to her, shooting a bullet right into the back of her head. A tattoo embedded into my brain. The threads of bullets intertwined in a way that could never be undone. Its echoes coursing through my mind, blocking out everything else. She fell to the floor with a thud, and the whole world seemed to be spinning in slow motion. The sound of a Sten . . . a weapon in itself.

The Nazi who shot her looked up at my horrified face with a bloodthirsty grin. My throat felt dry and my head dizzy with denial that my mother was dead. As he raised his gun; I knew there was nothing left for me there.

So, on that day, the first of September 1939, I fled my small town on the outskirts of Poland. Since then, I have been on the run. Searching for safety. For justice. For peace. That's where I am now.

I lift a hand to my face, feeling a hot, sticky, trickle of blood flow down my cheek. As my fingers run over the gash, I feel the deep crevasse from the debris. The dust blows around me, stinging my eyes and face. As I strain to see my surroundings, I notice a body further down my chosen hillside. Unsure if the life is lost, I pull myself up onto my elbows and towards the stranger.

Nearing the figure, I notice it is a man. His eyes are closed, and his clothes are dotted with blood, but his chest is slowly heaving. Lifting my fingers to his wrist, I feel that his pulse is strong and powerful. Leaning on the side of the trench, I pull myself up and onto my feet. With the man slung over my shoulders, I begin the journey to safety.

Slowing down to have a break, I hear an unmistakable noise. A noise I have been dreading to hear. A train. Thinking fast, I lay the man down on his back and begin

shaking his shoulders to wake him up. Nothing. Hearing the train noises getting closer, I frantically try to wake him up. With a swift slap across the face, the man's eyes fly open. I urgently explain to him.

"There is a train coming! Hurry!" I hissed, seeing the realisation in his eyes. We both leap up and dive for cover behind a bush. He has a tall, muscular build and big, brown eyes. His red-brown hair that fell just above his eyes and his slightly hooked nose told me he was a Jew like me. I am suddenly distracted from my thoughts as the train pulls around the bend.

It has hundreds of carriages, all made of wood and metal scraps. Each compartment has a window barricaded with iron bars, stopping the prisoners from escaping. Across the wall of a carriage, words have been messily painted to read '*Auschwitz*'. Immediately my mind was flooded with images of the death camp and its many gas chambers . . . the thought of such a cruel death made me sick. I looked up at the man and noticed he must have been thinking the same thing, as his eyes were full of terror.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see a young woman jump off the train and try to make a run for it. I have high hopes for her, until a soldier guarding the top of the train shoots and she falls to the ground. My eyes begin to well with tears, my sympathy for the woman growing stronger with every second. In that moment I silently pray for all the lives lost during this war and the suffering they had to endure.

After the train is long gone, I begin to crawl out from behind the bush. I feel a hand on my shoulder, forcing me to turn back around. The man looks up at me. His mouth opens to speak, but he seems unsure of what to say. Eventually, he introduces himself.

"My name is Noa," he starts, "I escaped a train not long before you found me. It came to my hometown and demanded we all boarded, shooting anyone who refused."

By now, his eyes are red and wet. I don't need him to tell me, because I already know by the look on his face that he lost someone really important to him. Someone who made him wake up in the morning, because he was living his life for them.

"I boarded, but never made it to the other side. One hour into the trip, I ripped the bars off the window and jumped. I survived with minimal injuries, including this." He points to the wound on his lower leg, a mark only a bullet could create.

I was so focused on Noa's story that I didn't hear the low whirs of an engine not-so-far away. The steady beat of the train's wheels against the tracks neared, and before we could process what was happening, the train was screeching to a halt in front of us. Much like the previous one, the train's carriages read '*Auschwitz*'.

A Nazi soldier jumped down from atop the train, his steel-capped boots digging into the soil. With a swaggering-strut, he approaches us. Looking us both up and down, the disgust in his face grows more and more with every second. My heart beats faster than ever before, desperately trying to come up with an escape plan. I glance at

Noa, expecting him to put up a fight, but instead, he raises his arms in surrender. The soldier sneers. I have no choice but to do what he says.

Holding us both by the collar, we are dragged toward the train. Using a key around his neck, the soldier unlocks an empty carriage and throws us in. He locks the door behind him, aggressively slamming it shut. As he walks away, I hear him mutter under his breath.

“Filthy Jews.”

The compartment is dark, the only light being that of the window. Dust coats the floor, drying my mouth. I suddenly realise that I never actually introduced myself to Noa. As if reading my mind, he looks me in the eye.

“You never told me your name.”

His voice is calm, relaxing my mind. I breathe in and out, then speak.

“My name is Aila. My town was also invaded, but instead of boarding a train, we were bombed and shot. I watched my mother die, and I knew I had to leave.”

I look up at him and I can tell my words had an impact.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Aila.” I can hear by the sincerity in his voice that he really is sorry for what happened to me.

We’ve been on the train for day-or-so now, Noa’s company quenching my loneliness, his words comforting me. We’ve tried numerous times to bend the bars on the window but haven’t had any luck. We often hear gunshots, but we hold each other close to block out the sound of pain. For the first time since my mother died, I feel at ease. It feels like Noa and I against the world. Yes, it is scary. Yes, we are heading towards death. But I no longer feel alone.

“I’ve heard about Auschwitz. It’s a place where they take us Jews to be killed in the most gruesome and cruel ways possible. We’re sectioned into groups; some die, some don’t.”

He pauses, letting his words sink in. My stomach drops. How could we possibly survive?

Our journey must be coming to an end soon, we’ve been on the train for almost four days now. My water canteen is running low and our stomachs are bloated from starvation, but we’re alive. We have come up with a plan to help us escape, but its only flaw is that it will only work if we are grouped together. Both praying three times a day, all we can do is hope that we will be in the same group.

After five long days, we arrive in Oswiecim, the town of Auschwitz. People hurry around the roads with their heads down, trying not to gather any attention from soldiers or passers-by. Our train begins to slow, its wheels sending sparks up. We abruptly stop. I hear carriage doors opening, before ours is flung open by a Nazi soldier. We are ushered out by guns pointed to our heads and the men bearing them wearing cruel smirks. There aren’t words to describe the fear I am in.

The grouping begins and I notice a familiar pattern . . . men and women. No. I can't be separated from Noa. I am brought back to reality when a soldier roughly grabs my arm and begins dragging me away. I desperately scramble to get out of his clutch, but he only tightens his grip and raises his gun to warn me. Urgently attempting to escape, I bite down hard on his hand. He immediately releases his grip and says something in German to another soldier.

Hands and legs tied together; I am on a stage-like building with three soldiers aiming their guns at me. All Jews and Nazis are in the audience about to watch me be executed. A tall man steps onto the stage and the soldiers all drop to their knees, bowing their heads. *How could I be so stupid to bite a Nazi? What have I done!* My thoughts breed like rabbits, multiplying by the second.

The man speaks in a menacingly friendly tone, like a teacher talking to little kids. "Today we're going to be learning about what happens to Jews who rebel." My eyes water and I begin to shake. I scan the audience for Noa, urgently searching. "Please demonstrate, soldiers." I close my eyes, bracing myself for the feeling of death. The soldiers raise their guns behind me, preparing to shoot. Click. Click.

"Stop!" My eyes fly open. Noa is standing in the middle of the audience. "I beg your pardon, Jew?" the man fired. "Do not kill her, kill me!" Noa yells. The man ponders the thought. "Well, if you say so." A soldier grabs Noa from behind and my binds are instantly cut. "No!" I scream, unable to let him die. Noa looks me in the eye and mouths three words. *You can survive*. Tears flow from my eyes, my only friend about to be taken away. One loud bang, and all is over.

If Noa can sacrifice his life for mine, I must let his spirit live on. I promise to myself, here and now, that I will live. For me. For him.

The sound of a Sten . . . the echo of death intertwined into my brain forever.