

Response to Cloonan's Guest, Judith Altman

Today was an important day for all of Cloonan's eighth graders. A Holocaust survivor, Judy Altman, came and shared her unforgettable past. Through her riveting details and clear depictions, I could begin to envision what life was like for the Jewish population from the early 1940's to the day of liberation. Her words, describing everything from being forced out of her home to moving to Sweden as a free woman, touched my heart, and surely the hearts of others. Though, what really resonated with me was a quote. Judy explained that Hitler once said, "If the war was to end at 12:00, midnight, at 11:55, I would have enough time to kill the rest of the prisoners." The reason for this was in his eyes, he had already won the war. He was losing in Stalingrad and defeat would soon be upon him, but he still considered himself victorious. His main mission was to eliminate all of the Jews, which he almost carried out successfully. By the time he died, he had the deaths of millions imprinted upon his soul. Yet, he did not feel the slightest regret for murdering innocent men, women, and children. The near extermination of an entire race was exactly what he wanted. But, this piece of information is what perhaps disturbs me the most. How is it possible that a man could judge an entire population as impure, without even meeting most of them? How is it that he did not see the wrong in his actions? How is it that one, twisted person could convince everyone to turn against the followers of a specific religion? The power he had over the Germans is scary to contemplate.

Another memorable part of the assembly this morning was when Judy described the separation between her and her parents. Resurfacing that day had such an emotional impact on her that she was on the verge of tears. Voice shaking, hands quivering, and eyes watering, she told the audience her father's last words to her. His hand on her head, he managed to say, "Judy, you will live," before departing. That was the last time she would ever see him. Hearing the pain in her speech and seeing this sensitive side to her, I felt my stomach drop and almost wanted to cry. Then, Judy went on to talk about how she watched her mother faint at the selection, shortly after she was moved to the right. Her mother never wanted to go to the concentration camps, and was even thinking about killing herself before leaving the ghettos. Therefore, the sight of her mother being overwhelmed by her new surroundings made her want to rush to her side. However, despite her attempts, Dr. Mendel managed to drag Judy to the left. Little did she know at the time that he saved her life. She never thought that he would be one to help others, for he certainly did not help most. Anyone with the slightest imperfection, such as a pimple or hunchback, was moved to the right.

Finally, the effect the Holocaust had on the survivors was horrifying. During her presentation, Judy mentioned that one of the survivors, a twin, was so emotionally scarred by all the tests and experiments he went through, that he vowed never to see a doctor again. Despite his physical condition, he would not go to the hospital. Because of his consistent reluctance, his family had to bring him to the emergency room while he was unconscious. No matter how desperately in need of help he was, he would never visit a medical practitioner by choice. The Nazis must have pricked him, probed him, and tortured him to the point where he lost all trust in others. The remainder of the twins that survived the Holocaust felt the same way, and refused to marry or start a family. They became dysfunctional to the point where any type of recovery was unlikely. Most pairs of twins would spend their lives alone, thinking the world was out to harm them. I cannot help but feel pity for these poor people.

Nevertheless, not everyone persecuted the Jews. There were several people who put their lives on the line to harbor and protect them. For example, there were those who hid Jews in their homes, and nuns who kept them in their churches. In addition, one S.S. woman saved Judy's life. When her hand was broken, and she couldn't work, a train was coming to transport weak prisoners to an extermination camp. She was sure she would be among the Jews sent to the gas chambers. Though, her fate changed when the officer took her to the hospital. As if that wasn't enough, the S.S. woman wrote a letter to the head of the factory, too, excusing Judy from work for a little while. I was glad to be told that amid the thick collection of hate the Jews took in each day, there were still people who felt sorry or sympathy for them.

In general, the message that I learned from Judy's life story was to always treat others fairly. By discriminating the Jews, Hitler is considered a bully. So, when people tease others for their race or make an effort to torment them, they are following his example. It is for this reason that Judy doesn't believe in taking revenge against those who hurt her. She chooses to be the better person and demonstrate positive qualities. Judy sets the bar for all future generations, and everyone should try to develop a personality like her's to prevent another Holocaust from occurring.