

Hello, I want to begin my talk with a question to you.

Who of you does not know situations like these?

- Maybe you have started to prepare for an exam in university or a challenge at work too late, although it was clearly recommended to start early.
- Maybe you were attracted by the wrong people and did things you didn't plan to do.

I assume that all of us remember situations in which we - despite all warnings - have made mistakes. I definitely do. And a lot of us even did the mistake more than once until we understood that it was wrong.

So now please think about the reasons which have made you change your behavior: I suppose the reasons for change were the more difficult situations and problems you got into. You felt the problems and maybe even the hurt rising and this has made you change your behavior.

Through feeling the consequences **of your actions** you have learned from **your own past** and **your own experience**.

My name is Ruth-Anne Damm and I believe that it is extremely important to learn from the past. I try to do this every day, not only from my own past, but from the past of our country as well. I wish that it wouldn't be necessary to do mistakes twice or more until we learn.

Six years ago I became a second witness of the holocaust. I talked to survivors who have changed my life. In an emotionally very painful way I discovered what happened. And I can tell you: **it hurts**.

It hurts to listen to a survivor of seven death camps.

It hurts to listen to stories of violence, of murder, of the personal loss of dearest family members and the shattering of one's own dreams.

It puts it into perspective when you travel to places like Auschwitz, Treblinka and many more. You understand that your 92-old friend Rolf was standing at exactly this spot, when he lost his Mother and his beliefs.



Through listening I became a second witness and from there learned that nothing like this may ever happen again. **That we can not ever afford to forget.**

Remember: we just talked about learning by feeling the consequences of our actions.

There are mistakes of our history I definitely do not want to repeat. Instead I want to learn from the remembrance!

But this obviously seems to be very difficult. We all know that history is repeating itself! And this is something that has to stop!

We have to stand up against the injustice happening today:

- Against the power of hate and prejudice;
- Against the conscious and strategic building of fears;
- Against the belief that some lives are worth more than others.

Mankind should never ever have to experience again what my friends Rolf, Channoch, Frieda, Ellisheva, Hannah and so many more survivors and murdered victims of the holocaust had to live through.

I believe, that **only then, when we understand and feel our past and when we understand** what can lead people to mass killings and discrimination - **then** we are able to learn how to create a better future!

Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel once said: „Only those who experienced Auschwitz know what it was. Others will never know. But would they at least understand?“

But how shall we understand the indescribable? How can we even attempt to understand, when soon the survivors themselves cannot tell their stories anymore?

We need more witnesses! Witnesses who open themselves to the hurtful stories of others and who pass on in a personal way. I believe that it's the emotions we learn from, not the hard facts and numbers.

What do you see in this picture?



We see a picture of eyeglasses taken from more than 1.1 Million murdered men, women and children in Auschwitz. Telling their stories we realized in our work that these large numbers are very, very difficult to understand. Who can understand more than six million murdered jews? And thousands of more murdered people such as Sinti and Roma, disabled people and political opponents?

We realized that these unimaginable numbers and facts about the holocaust can be overwhelming and can bring people to the point where they want history to be closed. They say it has been enough.

But I am asking you: Can we really afford the the biggest lesson of mankind to be forgotten?

How shall we learn and create a future if we don't understand the past and especially that, which seems beyond our imagination?

Could you imagine that anything so brutal, so cruel, would happen to you and the neighbor next to you today? A lot of the victims of the holocaust couldn't, which was one of the reasons why many tried to escape only when it was already too late.

In German you have the term „Zeitzeuge" - which translated means: Time witness. Meaning a witnesses of a certain time period. If we just add a „w" into this German term it becomes „Zweitzeuge" - translated meaning „Second Witness“.

As Second Witnesses we try to give a face to these huge numbers and facts.

One of my closest friends name is Rolf Abrahamsohn. Rolf was born in 1925 in Germany, just 20 minutes away from our venue, where he still lives today. When you talk to him about his childhood he begins to smile. He loved the first years of his life. He had four brothers, loving parents, a lot of friends. His nickname was „Würstchen" which translated means small sausage. The reason for his nickname was that he always had small sausages with him in school and was happy to share. His parents had a big shop selling textiles and all in all were doing well. But with the power of the Nazis rising things got more and more difficult for the family. His father was wondering if they should leave Germany but then decided against it. Like many others also they could not imagine, that anything like the mass murders that were to follow could happen. The family Abrahamsohn were well-respected Germans themselves. Rolfs father had been an important military chief officer in World War I. He talked to his military friends about the tense situation but they, too, told him not to worry. They, too, couldn't imagine anything happening to him and his family.

It was in the infamous Night of the Broken Glass, in November 1938, when everything changed for Rolf. Nazis entered the shop of the family Abrahamsohn who lived above it. They came in and set a fire. The father ran down to stop the fire and when it knocked on the door he believed firemen were there to help. But there were no firemen. Instead there were SS-Men stumbling in and beating his father with an iron bar almost to death. It was the thirteen year-old Rolf and his mother who under tremendous danger pulled his unconscious and bleeding father out of the fire. Instead of getting any help this night the whole family was arrested and had to spend the night in prison - just because they were jews.

I still can hear Rolfs voice in my ear saying: My brother Norbert was not older than five! Tell me, what can a five-year-old do to be trapped in prison?

After this the family tried to escape. Rolf's father and his oldest brother fled to Belgium where they were waiting for the rest of the family to arrive. But the borders were already closed and

Rolf, his mother and his youngest brother Norbert couldn't make it to Belgium anymore. In the meanwhile Rolf's father and brother were arrested and brought to Auschwitz. In Auschwitz they were one of the very first who arrived and were killed.

This was the beginning of an until today never ending nightmare. In the next weeks, months and years Rolf worked under the most cruelest conditions, he lost his family and friends, saw his Mom dying, he became witness of beaten up babies, children, adults and seniors, of mass shootings and dying from starvation and feeling the violence and hurting hunger himself. He was deported to seven different labor and concentration camps and experienced what nobody can imagine. On the day of his liberation there was only a skeleton of 38 Kilograms left of him.

A skeleton who had to learn everything new from the start.

He had to learn to be Rolf again, had to learn to trust again, to love again.

Until today painful nightmares and flashbacks come back - every single day - and keep him from sleeping.

But still, as unimaginable as his whole story is: he is such a cool guy! He calls me to tell me a new joke he heard. He calls to talk about the last soccer game of his favorite team Borussia Dortmund. He calls just to chat and he never gets tired in helping others in need or in telling his story to young children.

He says: if from 50 children you talk to, **only one** understands that jews are not better or worse than others, then you have achieved a lot.

With his words in mind we in our association invest as much as we can to talk to children and teens. They are the ones growing up, making decisions, deciding between fair and unfair. They are the ones which will create our future.

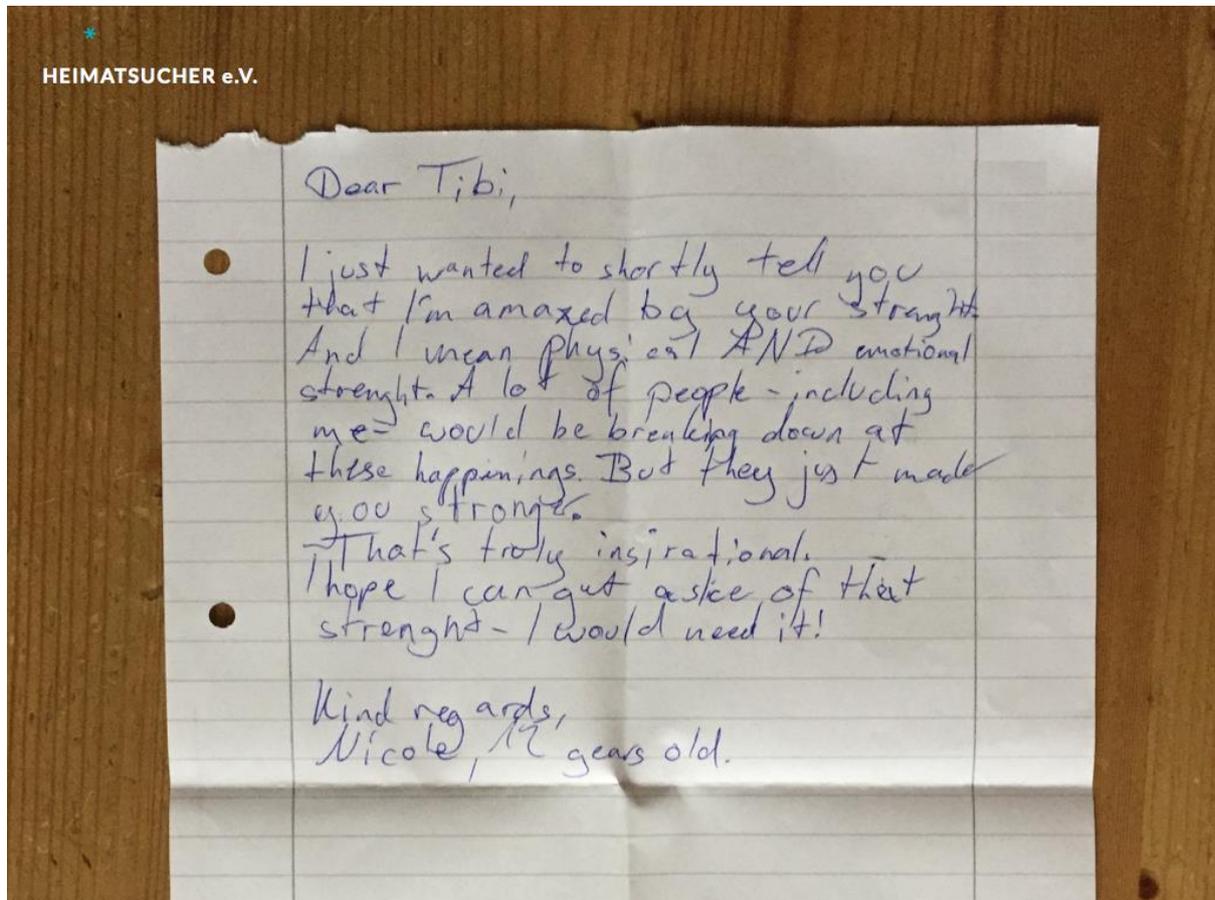
It has been scientifically proven that around the age of nine prejudices are being build and questioned by children. We believe that this is the most important time to talk about the development of the holocaust and its far reaching consequences, because we hope for young people to become tolerant and empathetic persons knowing their past and the privileges of their present.

We always have three steps in working with children. We first of all start with a **GETTING TO KNOW** facts and figures about the holocaust. We talk about the time and see how much everybody in the class knows. You will be surprised to see how much even very young children know about the Holocaust. They are hungry to learn and we always find ways to explain what we know in a way that suits their age.

In the next step we **REMEMBER** together. We tell the kids a story and have them read a story of a survivor on their own. It gives me the biggest goose bumps to see children feeling and discussing the stories of the survivors. They are mad about the injustice which took place. We give them chances to identify - such as with Tibi who loved to play soccer, Frida who wanted to be a doctor or Ellisheva who was in big first love with Berni. I can see the children stomping their feet to the ground when they feel the injustice of a teacher given the worst grades to the best student in class, just because this student is a jew.

Very important after these two steps of **getting to know** and **remembering** is to give children the chance to give something back to the survivors and their environment. We call this step - **PASSING ON**. We give children the time to take action and to create their own way of remembering. We have had children creating own movies, organizing an exhibition in their community, have them walk through their school and retelling the stories to other students.

The children even get the chance to write a letter to the survivors which really reaches them. Today I brought a letter of a 12 year old girl, who was brave to write in english, with me:



It is words like these which give so much back to the survivors. We have met survivors who had promised themselves to never talk to a Germans again and here they are receiving beautiful letters from children - full of sympathy and hope.

I want to share one of the survivors reactions in receiving these letters with you:

BRIEFE AN DIE HEIMATSUCHER

You can see why we are doing what we are doing. I sometimes can't believe what our association called HEIMATSUCHER has achieved already: an idea born at a kitchen table by two young students developed into a far reaching project in which nowadays more than 100 young people put their voluntary time into, just like I do. We have had more than 12.000 visitors in our exhibition, talked to more than 4.000 children and teens. But for us this is just the start. We are just young people moved by our beliefs and passion, looking for others who believe in our mission and who are willing to help.

Siegmund Pluznik, one of the survivors told us about a lady who saved his life with just a razor blade. He was hiding in Vienna at the time. In the early mornings he used a public restroom to make himself look as ordinary as possible. He used to say that to provoke nobody's attention to oneself was the biggest challenge of being on the run. The cleaner realized what was going on but instead of betraying him, she once gave him a new razor blade so his beard would not give him away. Thinking about this woman Siegmund used to say: „To help a person in need you don't need a doctorate or any other title. You only have to have your heart at the right spot.“

So at the end of this talk I want to leave you with these wishes:

Be brave and have the confidence to feel. With feeling you will start to understand and remembering won't be a question anymore.

Be brave to stand up against injustice. If it is not you who stands up, who will?

And last but not least: Be brave to take over responsibility. Elie Wiesel said: „When you listen to a witness, you become a witness.“

Let us all do that - let's be second witnesses.

Thank you.



**»When you listen to
a witness,
you become
a witness.«**

Elie Wiesel

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