

Paul Schmitz: Personal Statement

Zionism to me stems from the home my grandfather did not have to escape to when he was sent to Auschwitz in 1943. My grandfather was a Holocaust survivor who lost most of his family in Auschwitz. He came to Ellis Island without a penny to his name at the age of 22. His goal was to one day travel to Israel but due to having 8 strokes throughout his life, he was never able to fulfill this dream. Instead, my grandfather did everything in his power to instill Jewish values and a passion for Israel in my family. Because of this, I was participated in an 8th grade trip to Israel where I visited Yad Vashem.

With hands shaking and legs barely moving, I walked into the darkened, circular room as a young innocent child and left as an adult with a purpose: a legacy to fulfill. To be the first person in my family who made it to Israel and had the privilege of going to Israel's Children's Holocaust Memorial in memory of my great-aunt Eva, I listened closely to the audio cycle that rotates through 1.5 million names of children who were killed in the Holocaust. I knew that the odds of hearing the name of my great aunt, who was brutally murdered at age nine in Auschwitz, was almost impossible. With only moments allotted to experience each section of the memorial, I began to regretfully leave. My friends were ready to move on. They implored, "Enough is enough" to which I responded, "Not enough for me!" Not even a second later, the surreal sound suddenly echoed in my eardrums. Eva Felberbaum. I recognized that this was a life-altering experience, awakening me into a more purposeful role. It was not just about me anymore but the me's who came before me.

Growing up, I heard stories of her that personified true kindness and true spirituality that was uncharacteristic of someone of such a young age. Unfortunately, those endless possibilities were ripped from her when she was gassed at Auschwitz. Thus, with every decision, feeling, and thought that I possess, I keep her constantly in my mind. This experience changed me and further strengthened my Zionist beliefs.

As my great-aunt's name reverberated in my ears, merging with the acknowledgment of my grandfather's name that I proudly bear, I became a person with a given responsibility. I needed to know my history in order to continue my family's unfinished story. Every aspect of my life, including my existence, has been due to my relatives. This notion compels me to embody

their legacies. Every opportunity that my great aunt was robbed of becomes my chance to help her and my other relatives live on. In all that I do, I try to embody the qualities that those before me possessed. In that fleeting instant when I heard my great-aunt's name in the Holocaust Museum, I had an auditory connection to my past and then my future shaped into one goal -- to continue the legacy of those important people before me and have them live on through me. That moment put my life into perspective, changing who I was and who I have the potential to become. That perspective shows to me the importance of Israel; a place my grandfather and his family was unable to go however, a place today that I have a home, always.