

Upon entering the Freeman Family Foundation Holocaust Education Centre, I was told to join my group of about fifteen people, standing very close together in a small rectangle painted on the floor. I felt sort of sick being packed so close to so many people, even though they were my friends, especially when we realized that our number was probably less than a fifth of the number of people who would have been stuffed into a boxcar that size during the Holocaust. And there were many more differences. We were in a nice, lighted room. They were enclosed in a dark, smelly boxcar. We stood there for two minutes. They stood there for days. We were with friends. They were with strangers.

Personal space is an important right that I think we often take for granted, living in Canada. But how would we really feel if it was taken away? Personal space is only one of many basic human rights that victims of the Holocaust had taken away from them.

In Canada today, everyone has a right to the basic necessities of life. Welfare provides for those who cannot afford it shelter, clothes, and enough food to stay alive. This is something we have come to expect. We know that while we are living in Canada, we will never have to worry about starving to death because we don't have enough food, or freezing to death on the streets, if we don't want to. Victims of the Holocaust- in ghettos and concentration camps could have been rich or poor. Even the most successful Jew in Germany, who might have been accustomed to the most comfortable of lifestyles, was still subject to being thrown in a concentration camp or ghetto, with no promise of having enough food to feed his family.

Canada gives us the right to freedom of speech. We have the right to question our teachers, our bosses, and the government, openly, without fear of being arrested or punished. It is impossible to imagine what it was like to have to watch one's every move,

because speaking out against a Nazi officer could easily mean sudden death. In such a position, how could one even think of standing up for what was right, or trying to speak out?

Hygiene in our society is something that one can have as much of as they want. There are clean public washrooms everywhere, so that one can wash one's hands as many times throughout the day as one finds necessary. Public institutions are cleaned throughout the day, so that we would never expect to see any sort of waste stay on the floor of a public building for more than fifteen minutes. We take off our shoes when coming into a house, because we expect the house to be so clean that whatever dirt might be on our shoes from walking outside would make it noticeably dirtier. Look at this scenario in contrast with the way a Jewish prisoner lived in the early 1940's. Not only were there all forms of waste and even dead bodies everywhere, but it was the job of prisoners to pick up these dead, disease infested bodies, and bring them to crematoria. Toilets were holes in the ground that were used by thousands of sick people, never once being cleaned. As was mentioned earlier, people traveled in boxcars for several days, never once getting out to breathe fresh air. Where do you think their waste went, when there was barely enough room for everyone inside to stand up? Today, sick people stay home to rest, and to avoid infecting others. In a concentration camp, five people slept on a bunk together- diseased or not. Women today rely on feminine hygiene products at the time of their menstruation. But do you think that Nazis would have provided products to their female prisoners every month? Or that the women would get a break from work? As would be unimaginable today, women who continued to menstruate were also forced

to continue working, regardless of the humiliation they had of blood dripping down their legs.

In Canada in the twenty-first century, the vast majority of people do mostly non-physical work throughout the day. People work in offices, drive buses, or sit in desks at school. Those who do have physical jobs- working on construction sites or in factories, mainly do so by choice, and get breaks throughout the day for lunch or to go to the washroom. Workers take a day off when they aren't physically up to working, and they have weekends and holidays to take a break from their work. When one was a prisoner in a forced labour camp, one did not have the option of an office job. One couldn't decide that he or she was too tired or sick to work that day. Indeed, if that were the case, almost every prisoner in a forced labour camp would need to take every day off as a sick day. There was no weekend or vacation to look forward to.

Imagine what we would do if just one of these basic rights was taken away from us. How would we react if our classrooms at school were reduced in size by ten times, forcing us to give up a great deal of personal space? What if, when we went to summer camp, we were told to sleep in a bunk with four other people, three of whom had deadly diseases? What if we, as women, had no sanitary products available to us, and were forced to go to work while menstruating? What if we worked in a building with no washroom? What if, in essays, or just speaking in public, we had to watch what we were saying, for fear of being shot? Would we put up with any of these removals of the rights we have come to expect? If any one of these rights were taken away from us, we would feel very mistreated, and unfortunate.

We must remember that before the Holocaust, the people who would be victimized by the Nazis led lives similar to our own. They too expected the basic rights that we expect. The same sense of shock, outrage, or helplessness that we might imagine that we would feel if these rights were taken away from us tomorrow are feelings they would have felt too. That strange, horrible world that we can imagine for ourselves without our basic human rights, became a reality for victims of the Holocaust. We must always remember that they were once just like us.