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11-12 Grade Category, Second Place

Eleven million people died over the course of the Holocaust. Over half those numbers represent Jews; the other half has been nearly forgotten because the things that made them different were so widely varied. Five thousand of these millions were homosexual individuals; a group of people that have faced discrimination throughout time.

“An unnatural sex act committed between persons of male sex or by humans with animals is punishable by imprisonment; the loss of civil rights may also be imposed.”

The above quote, taken from German Penal Code 1871, Paragraph 175, was part of German law for hundreds of years before the Nazis came to power. Generally, it wasn't enforced; the law itself defined homosexuality so narrowly that prosecution was difficult. Before the war, literary publications and gay bars sprang up as gay culture flourished in the cities. While relationships were best conducted with discretion, a level of relative tolerance had been established; however, Hitler's reign of terror ended it all. Homosexual groups were banned. Stormtroopers began raiding gay bars and homes in the summer of 1933. Homosexual men were arrested for the “intent” of committing homosexual actions, and confessions were brutally extracted from these “criminals.” A man had little chance of going to trial and soon found himself in a prison, detention center, or concentration camp. Even Hitler's staff was not exempt from this cruelty.

Between 5,000 and 15,000 homosexuals were sent to concentration camps over the course of the Nazi reign. These men were considered a threat to the Aryan race; they could not reproduce and threatened the Nazi image of the dominant man and submissive woman. They suffered in the camps as much as any other group -- perhaps even more so. In some camps, gay inmates were kept separate from other inmates. The pink triangle sewn to their uniforms was often larger than any other designating symbol, so that inmates and soldiers alike could identify them and keep their distance. Homosexuals were required to sleep in only their shirts with hands outside the blankets -- no matter how far the temperature plummeted -- to discourage any illicit activity. Nightly checks were conducted. A man found

with his hands under his blanket would be stripped naked, forced to stand outside and drenched in ice water. Few survived this punishment. Punishments were not necessarily meant to kill an offending inmate. German homosexuals were undeniably Aryan; it was the "homosexual spirit" that was being punished, not the Aryan man. Nevertheless, the Nazi's cruel "justice" killed many.

The liberation of the concentration camps began in 1944, but the persecution of German homosexuals did not end. Many gays who had been inmates at concentration camps were imprisoned again as Paragraph 175 was still in effect. The time they spent in camps was deducted from their prison terms, and they moved from one confinement to the next. Those who were not charged once again for their sexuality faced a world that saw them as a threat to normal society. Hoping to rebuild shattered lives, few survivors spoke out about what had happened to them. Until 1971.

Heinz Heger (the pen name of an Austrian survivor) chose to tell the world his story. Titled *Man with the Pink Triangle*, it opened the floodgates for memoirs, historical research, even plays and film documentaries. Survivors called for a formal apology from the German government as had been granted to the other victims of the Holocaust. In 2000, 55 years after the end of the war, the German government issued a formal apology to the homosexual victims of the Holocaust and to those who had been prosecuted after the end of the war.

This final recognition of the suffering of homosexuals during the time of the Third Reich would not have happened without the incredibly courageous actions of the anonymous Austrian who published his experience. His publication could have had dangerous repercussions, yet that did not deter him. He felt that the world had to know the story of the other victims of the Holocaust, so that while Jewish victims were remembered and honored, the homosexual victims were not forgotten. He refused to stand by and let the gay community, which had suffered so much already, continue to suffer in silence.

Just like Heger, Harvey Milk refused to let the gay community be silenced. Milk campaigned for years to represent the rapidly growing gay community of San Francisco in city politics. When other states passed Proposition 8, a law that would remove gay teachers from their positions on the basis that homosexual teachers were a major source of child molestation, Milk fought for the civil rights of the gay population of California. During his campaigns, both for his election and against Proposition 8, he received letters threatening his life, yet he continued. His selfless acts did end up costing him his life; city representative

Dan White shot Milk and the Mayor of San Francisco to death in 1978. However, because of his actions, gay civil rights for San Franciscans were protected.

This is what moral courage is. The ability to stand up and say, "No, this is not right," in the face of any hazard, be it social humiliation, personal injury or death. Whether it is the act of publishing a book or standing before a hostile crowd to speak what they believe, those few people with true moral courage will find some way to help those who are victims of injustice. The acts of the anonymous Austrian and Harvey Milk have shown me that I can change the world around me to become something less hateful to those who are different. A thousand small acts can change the world, and a small act of kindness to someone who may be shunned can change a life. I know I can be the change I want to see in the world.

#### Works Cited

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