

‘My Responsibility to America’

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I became an American without putting forth any effort. I was born here, so rights I did not fight for or journey towards are and have always been mine. I was born with the rights of an American, but I was not born with the knowledge of what it means to be a responsible one. But one day, last year, I learned what it takes to be a responsible American by spending time with an American who was a member of a different country when he was born.

A Hungarian-Jew, he was taken to Auschwitz when he was as old as I am now— younger than his grandson, my friend, who had made sure I’d meet him. The witness of a foreign war, he was treated as though he was not a member of his captor’s species; he was denied rights too many Americans are too quick to forget. In his mind, and in the minds of the soldiers that liberated the camp, the memory of what happened lodges with yesterday. Indifference caused his agony, and, more than seventy years later, agony continues wherever people are indifferent.

The country I call home is the same country he calls home, and it is the same nation that veterans of foreign wars fought to defend. America was the nation that welcomed a man who was unwelcome where he was born. The Mother of Exiles, as Emma Lazarus called her, opened her arms, shone her light on her golden door, took in a Hungarian-Jew, and made him an American.

His car pulled into the cul-de-sac, and my friend and I went out to greet him. With his learned frame and sharp mind, he asked me what my heritage was. “American,” I replied. “No! No!” he said, “no one’s heritage is entirely American. Everyone comes from somewhere else.” I listed four nations I’ve been told my not too distant ancestors came from all while smiling an agreeing grin. He was right, after all.

We went to lunch and talked about politics. He compared candidates for President to figures of ancient history, and he warned everyone at that wooden table we all sat around of the dangers presented by leaders whose egos outsize their brain and their heart. With the memory of fascism and Nazism burning with the intensity of

tomorrow's sunrise, he spoke of yesterday's transcendence—of history's transcendence. "Learn it," he said, "because what happened in the past is happening in the present."

He asked his granddaughter about her plans for college, and he pressured her to make sure she studied something meaningful. With the same hands that pulled him through the Holocaust, he grasped her arm and smiled.

And so, he, the witness of a foreign war, survivor of the Holocaust, and American-by-choice, taught me my responsibility to America. It is: to honor differences and care about my fellow Americans of all colors, creeds, and kinds, because indifference kills; to have empathy for the witness and veteran who have seen what I cannot imagine; to love those around me I'm lucky enough to know and the nation I'm lucky enough to call home with the passion that recognizes I could lose them both; to understand the world beyond my borders, because—as John Donne wrote—no man is an island; to learn the history of my heritage, our nation, and this planet, because without the knowledge of the past we are unable to create a better future.

When he was my age, he was in Auschwitz. When I am his age, I hope to be like him. He lives his life with honor and empathy and love and pride. And a whole lot of laughter.

Our responsibility to America is to live these values actively just like he has. If we do, we'll be doing our parts to make our union more perfect. May we all.