

Ordinary People
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Survivor Testimony: Sam Goetz

Whether it is the Victorian Age or the Umayyad Dynasty, history seems to be written by the greatest men and women of each era. However, through Samuel Goetz's testimony, I realized that it is actually the common people who have the greatest impact on the world. Ordinary people formed the Nazis, ordinary people saved the Jews from extinction, because when the everyday people make a decision, they change lives in a personal, powerful way that executives and monarchs never do. While we have all been influenced by ordinary people, few of us have been as transformed as Samuel Goetz was.

Although Samuel's adult life contains harrowing stories of survival through suffering, the moment that spoke to me the most came from his childhood. Samuel was an eleven year old, middle-class Jew living comfortably in Tarnow, Poland when Hitler's war machine occupied his homeland. At first, life went on normally for the Jews, but soon the extreme anti-Semitism of German civilians now in charge erupted on November 9, 1939, the first anniversary of *Kristallnacht*. Samuel recalled this all too real nightmare in vivid detail. He remembered his father opening the door of their apartment to reveal these civilians howling at his family to leave, but when they refused, they were dragged down to the courtyard by the mob. While in the courtyard, a German *civilian* put a revolver to Samuel's head. As the cold steel of the revolver kissed his flesh, Samuel refused to be afraid; even in the face of certain death. Fortunately, the German ultimately pulled back his revolver and Samuel's family was released. Eventually, his family found asylum at his uncle's home and he finally fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion as the traumatic event had taken a huge toll on him. Little did he know that he slumbered to the dancing flames of torched synagogues and Jewish corpses.

The chilling recollection of this atrocious night rattled me to my very core. I was aghast by the fact that this monster nearly slaughtered an innocent child for no reason. How could anyone, no matter how vile or twisted, even begin to think of murdering a little boy in cold blood? But more than anything Samuel's story made me realize how important and deadly the power of ordinary people can be. Hitler and the Nazis may have given people the opportunity to exercise their hatred of Jews, but it was the ordinary people, civilians, who seized this opportunity with both hands. If the common people had refused to accept this mission of malevolence, then Hitler's regime would have been rendered inert; because laws are only words and are useless without people to enforce them. If everyone had rejected these laws, then the rules would have never become reality and millions of lives could have been saved. Although ordinary people have usually utilized their power to the benefit of mankind, this power has claimed as many lives as it has saved.

While it is true that compassion can unite a crowd, the unfortunate truth is that many crowds unite around prejudice. I am an American Muslim, and as a result, I have faced my fair share of antipathy for my beliefs. Whether it is verbal barbs or blatant hostility, people never realize how deep and permanent the scars they create truly are. It is frightening how much hatred a few groups can incite in us from thousands of miles away, but what is even more terrifying is how much *we* arouse it in ourselves. History has told us the same story since the dawn of civilization that ordinary people decide the fate of humanity, but we, the ordinary people of today, don't have to choose the same path as our ancestors; we can choose a better one. That is why it is *our* duty, not the politicians or the generals, to ensure that the Holocaust never happens again. As ordinary people, we can choose to revel in that hatred of our darkest night or to live in the light of a new day. The choice is ours.