

1st Place: Faigy Israel

Ateres Bais Yaakov (Monsey, NY)

Shoes

Dear Hans,

You were just one year old when your mother put on your first shoe. She probably ruffled your curly hair, and smiled down at you. Maybe she even wiped away a tear, because her baby boy was growing up so fast. You probably felt very big and important as you took your first steps in your shoes. Your shoes were probably so special to you. Now you could run around outside in the park with your shoes. You could skip down the street while holding mamma's hand in your shoes. You could walk in daddy's giant footsteps when it snowed, in those little shoes of yours.

But then your world turned upside down. You must have felt so frightened. Strange men entered your town and your life would never be the same. How could a little boy like you comprehend what was going on? All you must have felt was confusion and fear. No longer could you play merrily in your shoes.

I don't pretend to even begin to understand what it was like to have your mother lace your shoes and walk out the front door for the last time. You were probably upset, but you didn't realize that those little shoes of yours were carrying you to freedom. Your shoes took you a long way, but eventually you reached safety.

Others were not as lucky as you. There were other little boys and girls, big ones too, that also put their shoes on one morning and walked out their doors for the last time. But their shoes carried them in the opposite direction that yours too you. All those girls, boys, babies, parents and friends were carried by their shoes to death. They were marched to rivers, forests, and gas chambers. There, their lives were stolen in an instant. There was no one left to walk their shoes back home. No one left to fill their shoes.

Their shoes symbolize a life that won't be filled. Your shoes symbolize a life that was filled.

I have similar shoes to you.

I was one year old when my mother bent down to lace my first pair of shoes. I was ecstatic. I grew older and my mother bought me more shoes. Shoes with frills for Shabbat. Shoes, with laces for the summer. Shoes with fur for the snow. My shoes carried me to school, to the playground, to the kotel. I grew older and soon I was buying shoes on my own. I spent hours debating between Adidas and Nike, Timberlands or Dr. Martens.

And one day, when I was 16, my shoes carried me out of my house in America, on to a plane and stepped on the tarmac in Odessa, Ukraine. There I walked on the same streets that thousands of my ancestors had walked. My shoes stepped on the stones soaked with the blood of my nation.

One morning during my visit, I put on my shoes and took a bus to the outskirts of town. I walked off the bus and my shoes kicked up dust as I walked down a dirt path. The same path, where 75 years before, 22,000 of my Jewish brothers and sisters had walked. Babies, children, mothers, fathers, brothers, grandparents, neighbors. They too walked with their shoes one morning down this path. The same steps my shoes were taking, they had taken too.

I stopped. They had been forced to stop. There was a clearing, with a few dogs walking on it. This was their final stop. Murdered all together, without mercy. Never to walk in their shoes again. Their shoes wouldn't be filled again. Their shoes couldn't carry them back. But my shoes could be filled. My shoes could carry me back. And they did. I had the ability to walk back, down the same path we had both taken.

And my shoes-they deserve someone to fill them to their capacity. Every morning when I put them on, I pause and think of all those empty shoes. And I think "what can do to fill my shoes today?"

Because Hans, you and I are alike. Our shoes have someone to fill them.