



Impunity Watch Essay Contest 2017

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This summer, I attended the Summer Institute for Human Rights and Genocide Studies for the first time. To say the least, it was enlightening. This may sound inconsequential, but I can assure it is not. When taking notes on recent and past atrocities and shaking hands with survivors of mass, organized, murder, something changed. For the first time in awhile, I felt a little spark of hope for the world, and that I wasn't fighting alone. I was surrounded by powerful, like minded people who are either actively mending the world or on their way to do just that. But this essay is not entirely about how wonderful the Summer Institute was for me, and will continue to be. For me, researching Raphael Lemkin, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Robert H. Jackson was about understanding the foundations before them, so that they could lay the foundations for the following generations. Who inspired them, so that I could be inspired today? Who changed their world, so that they could in turn make a difference? These factors are what elevate future activists and give us the vantage point of someone ready to take on the world.

Setting a bar takes strength, because in order for it to reach the expectations it upholds, it must be lifted to emerge from difficulties and challenges. So who gave Eleanor Roosevelt, Robert H. Jackson, and Raphael Lemkin the strength to make the changes they did in humanitarianism? For some, the people who supported them are as obvious as daylight. A permanent exhibit in the Robert H. Jackson Center in Jamestown, New York is held to honor the life of his strongest mentor, Mary R. Willard. Along with being his high school English teacher, Willard had a profound impact on his character, and his legal mindset. For example, when Jackson took the podium for his final statement in the Nuremberg Trials, he quoted Shakespeare's *Richard III*. This text was something that Willard particularly engaged Jackson in, knowing that someday he would put it to great use.

Another history altering mentor was Marie Souvestre, who Eleanor Roosevelt later acclaimed as one of the greatest influence on her educational and emotional development. Souvestre ran Allenswood Girl's Academy in Wimbledon Common, London, England and realized Eleanor Roosevelt's extreme potential when she attended her academy. Just as Willard expanded Jackson's education beyond the mandatory curriculum, Souvestre would travel with Roosevelt on school breaks to unconventional sights to observe working class and impoverished families living about their daily lives. For young Roosevelt, this was the beginning of a long career of sympathizing and representing the less fortunate. For Raphael Lemkin, I found his rise to activism as much more tragic. Lemkin's first grasp of education was in his Eastern Polish household, being homeschooled by his Jewish parents with his two brothers. In my research, I could not find a specific mentor that stuck out to me, but that his actions seemed to be derived from a place of great loss rather than guidance. Being that he lost close to 40 members of his family in the Holocaust, I believe that unfortunately, his loss drove him to take the actions he later did in life.

So now that one can identify the origins behind world changers such as these three, it is time to identify what exactly each did. To start with Lemkin, he studied the laws that allowed the Nazi occupation to occur after observing and fleeing it himself. Once removed from the atrocities of his homeland, Lemkin coined the term genocide from the Greek prefix geno, "race", and Latin verb cide, "killing". His renowned book, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* was such a landmark for identifying crimes against humanity that it was used as a tool for prosecution in the Nuremberg Trials.

In correlation to these trials, Lemkin became a legal advisor for our very own, Robert H. Jackson, being that the two first connected when Lemkin sent a copy of his book to Jackson. Following this time period in his life, he lobbied continuously for the justification of the term “genocide”. By the end of Lemkin’s career, he had successfully ratified the importance of labeling and understanding genocide with the introduction of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in 1948. Raphael Lemkin’s death in 1959 was really the only roadblock to his constant activism. Even years after his death, his impact on humanitarianism remains alive through his unprecedented work and inspiration for the generations that follow.

For Jackson, his work was implemented through the persecution of 22 Nazis following World War II. President Truman appointed him to organize and carry out these trials as Chief U.S. Prosecutor at the International Military Tribunal. In doing so, he created a procedure for all four Allied nations involved. During this time he also coined new terms that now seem obvious to the world such as “crimes against humanity” and “acts of aggression”. When the Nuremberg Trials concluded, Jackson continued his work in the US Supreme Court, forming the way this nation comprehends issues like Civil Rights and religious freedom.

When Eleanor Roosevelt was invited to the newly developed United Nations in 1946 by President Truman, she became a substantial representative for oppressed individuals all over the world. Being such and also being in an international environment, she began using her seat in the Social, Humanitarian and Culture Committee of the UN to draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This declaration was a milestone in human rights as it set a standard for the years to come. Besides being a part of the writing of this document, Roosevelt also swayed enough countries to support it. On December 10th of 1948, Roosevelt presented the declaration to the

UN General Assembly and then passed it, sealing the importance of speaking out on behalf the less fortunate into international relations forever.

These three extraordinary examples of change in the world have laid foundations for our collective understanding and protection of basic human rights, and that enough should be something to marvel at. Personally, I am inspired by the amount of bravery that must have taken place in their lifetime, especially following WWII. How these leaders took on the responsibilities and burden of fighting against hate, murder, and prejudice, is a reminder. A reminder, that as I grow older, I cannot waste my privilege to uphold basic human rights and to push for those rights to be granted to all.

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